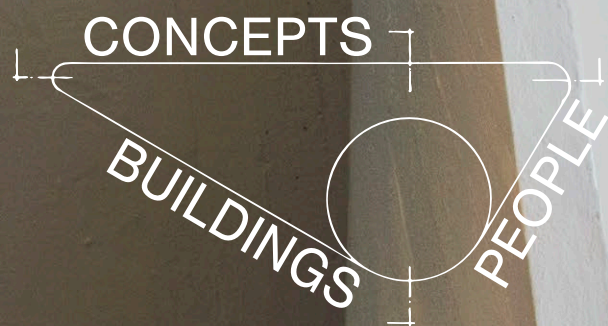


RE INTER PRETATION



ALVAR AALTO

ALVAR AALTO

REINTERPRETATION

— 6TH ALVAR AALTO RESEARCHERS'
NETWORK SEMINAR 6.–7.5.2026
SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS



ALVAR AALTO

Reinterpretation

**Seminar Proceedings of the 6th Alvar Aalto Researchers' Network Seminar,
6–7 May 2026, Jyväskylä, Finland**

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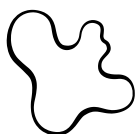
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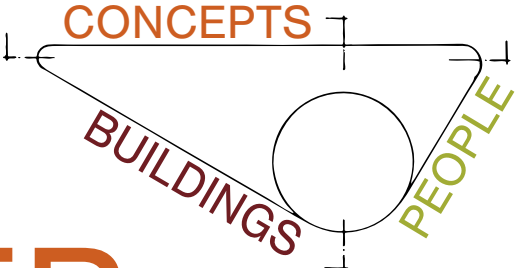
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ALVAR AALTO



RE INTER PRETATION

6TH ALVAR AALTO
RESEARCHERS' NETWORK SEMINAR
JYVÄSKYLÄ 2026



FOREWORD

The present publication brings together contemporary interpretations of the architectural and cultural legacy of Alvar, Aino, and Elissa Aalto at a moment when modernism is increasingly being revisited through renewed conceptual frameworks. The contributions – originally presented at the **6th Alvar Aalto Researchers' Network Seminar in Jyväskylä, 6–7 May 2026** – demonstrate how key notions associated with Aalto, such as extended rationalism, organic and cinematic spatiality, the human factor in design, and the critical tensions within functionalism, are being re-examined today. The overall seminar theme of REINTERPRETATION was subdivided into three sub-themes: CONCEPT, BUILDINGS and PEOPLE.

The CONCEPT-oriented articles trace Aalto's dialogues with classical precedents, explore evolving theoretical vocabularies, and engage philosophical anthropology to reconsider what "humane architecture" might signify across different periods and contexts.

The group of articles on BUILDINGS focuses on the ways in which their meanings shift through time, use, and changing societal demands. Paimio Sanatorium, Viipuri Library, Säynätsalo Town Hall, Maison Louis Carré, and Kauttua Terraced House are approached both as technical artefacts and living environments in which maintenance, care, sustainability, cost structures, and user experience shape new interpretations of architectural heritage. Several contributions address the material and economic conditions that influence contemporary construction, as well as the role of restoration, reinterpretation, and narrative in keeping architectural works culturally active.

The third group of articles turns attention to PEOPLE: the designers, collaborators, users, and communities whose perspectives broaden familiar narratives. Biographical re-readings and reflections on collaborative authorship, changing professional roles, and the embodied experience of architecture open new avenues for understanding the social dimensions of design. Together, these texts form a multifaceted exploration of how Aalto-related environments, ideas, and identities continue to be expanded, questioned, and reframed in the 2020s.

Wishing you an inspiring reading experience!

Nina Heikkonen and Mirkka Ollila

Editors, Alvar Aalto Foundation

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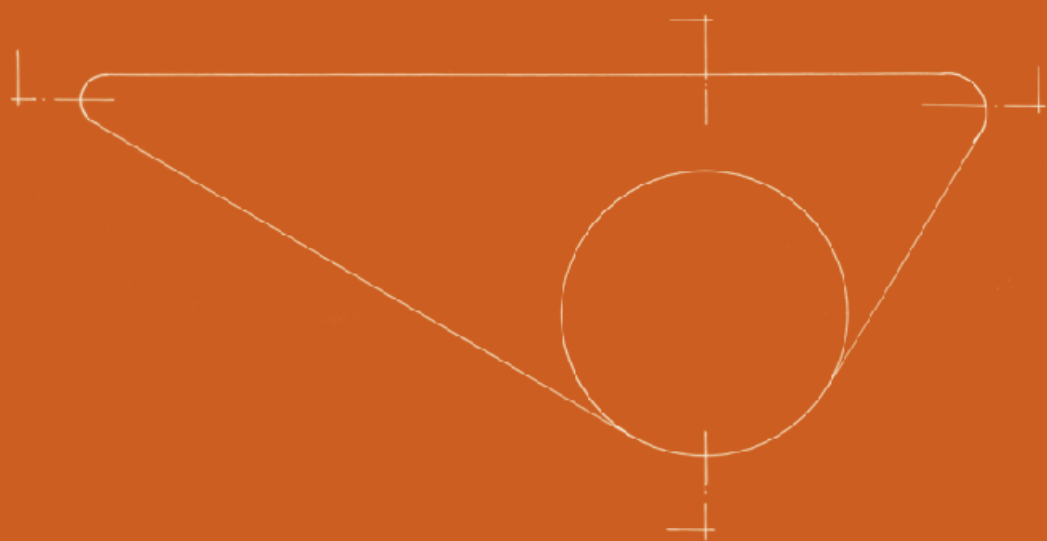
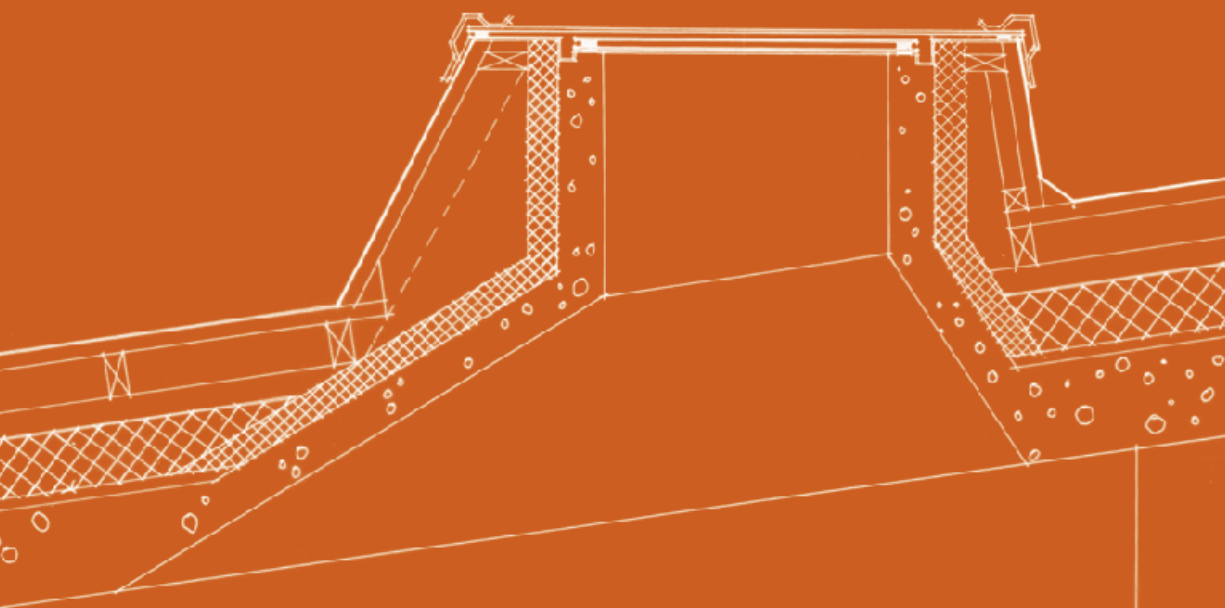
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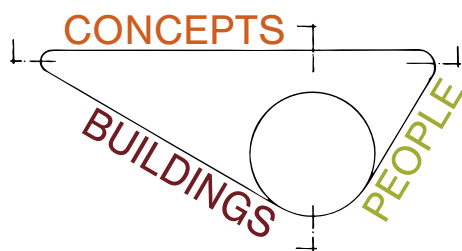
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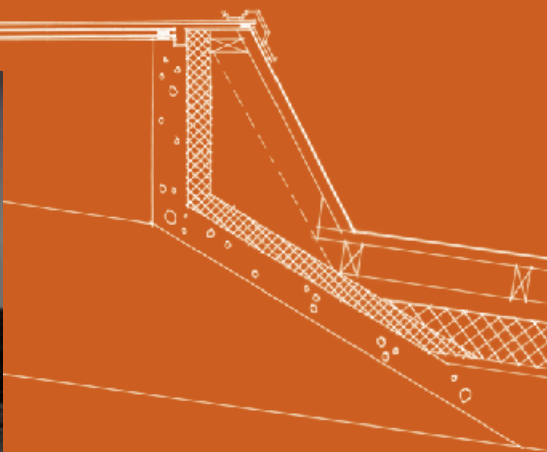
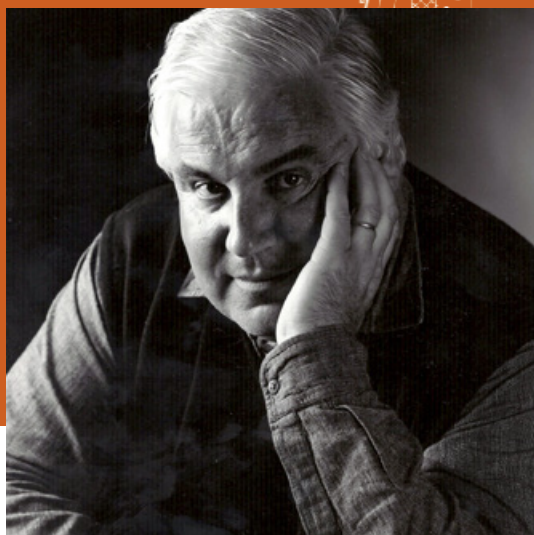


C o n c e p t s



RE
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PRETATION

C o n c e p t s



William J. R. Curtis

William J. R. Curtis is a historian, critic, artist and photographer. Educated at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London and Harvard University, he has taught at many universities including Harvard and Cambridge where he was Slade Professor of Fine Art. His best-known books include *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (1982, 1987, 1996) and *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (1986, 2015), both widely translated and referred to as 'classics'. Curtis has published on a vast range of other subjects and has contributed critical essays in the *Architectural Review*, *El Croquis*, *A+U*, *ARK (Finland)*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books*, among others. Long interested in Finnish architecture, he has published seminal texts on Alvar Aalto and Juha Leiviska in particular. Curtis's drawings and paintings, *Mental Landscapes*, were exhibited in the Museum of Finnish Architecture in 2000, and his photos, *Structures of Light*, in the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, in 2007. In 2015 a retrospective was held in the Palace of Carlos V of the Alhambra: *'Abstraccion y Luz/ Abstraction and Light: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs by William J. R. Curtis'* with an accompanying book. Curtis has received several awards, including the Gold Medal of the National Honor Society in Architecture and Allied Arts (USA), 1999; a 50-year Commemoration Medal from the Museum of Finnish Architecture, 2006; and the Médaille de l'Académie d'Architecture, 2022.

TRANSFORMATION AND INVENTION: AALTO'S OBSESSION WITH ANCIENT GREEK THEATRES

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"Nothing old is ever reborn but it never disappears either, and everything that has been reappears in a new form." — Alvar Aalto¹

We scarcely need to be reminded of Alvar Aalto's fascination with the classical Mediterranean world, beginning with his earliest buildings which take their place broadly speaking in the family of Nordic classicism. In his foundation works, he explored the use of the Orders, the allusion to historical types such as the palazzo and the villa, and mythical parallels between the landscapes of Finland and those of Italy and Greece. Jyväskylä, where he built some of these early projects, gained the reputation of being an 'Athens of the North'. Even during his 'transition' into modern architectural expression around 1930 in such works as the Turun Sanomat building and the Viipuri Library, Aalto integrated ordering devices such as the temple plan in the first example, the portico and processional stair in the second. Aalto absorbed some of the 'deep structures' of Classical architecture early on, and these continued to inform his work for the rest of his life on many levels. Driven by a vision of modern emancipation, this most modern of modern architects yearned for a lost world of Enlightenment values.

Aalto was never a rootless functionalist and was always open to the lessons of the past which he endeavoured to transform in his own architecture. He was quick to grasp the classical underpinnings of Le Corbusier's villas, especially the Villa Stein/de Monzie at Garches of 1928, and in some respects his Villa Mairea a decade later was a response to this machine age prototype, but in a way that exploded the free plan and integrated a range of rustic, biomorphic, vernacular, Japanese and post Cubist elements in a sophisticated collage. An abstraction of a forest clearing, Mairea also resonates with great neoclassical examples such as Schinkels's Court Gardener's House at Potsdam (1830), itself a distillation of Mediterranean references and meditations upon vernacular and Classical 'origins'. At Mairea a pastoral dream of the good life in 'nature' is combined with a sophisticated cosmopolitanism. This art house containing works by Matisse and Picasso also provides a primitivist wooden sauna with a turf roof and split log gutter. Steel and concrete structural columns are wedded with Finnish timber in its various states.

If Aalto explored perennial themes of the villa in history, he never ceased transforming the fundamental type of the Renaissance palace with its formal urban façade

and a patio or cortile at its heart. He absorbed the anthropomorphic Classical tripartite order of base, middle and top, and abstracted it in diverse designs at all scales. The traditional masonry arrangement for the palazzo with rusticated lower floor, piano nobile, and crowning cornice, was reinvented and inverted in modern space and materials in several of his urban realizations. The main entrance façade of the National Pensions Institute seems to contain echoes of Alberti's quattrocento Palazzo Rucellai (right down to the detail of the stone bench near the entrance), while the Rautatalo office building and the Academic Bookstore in central Helsinki provide metal frame renditions of classical urban facades. Their interiors open up liberating social spaces with floating horizontal levels and dramatic splayed skylights introducing Nordic daylight throughout the year. Aalto might have agreed with Ozenfant: "For deep in every revolution, discreetly hidden, resides a Classicism which is a form of constant."²

Aalto's transformations of classical examples and principles went much deeper than mere geometrical schematizations and allusions: they penetrated to the spiritual and physical core of ancient works, sometimes experienced in the naked form of ruins. His metamorphoses were manifest in the anatomy of his buildings, their physical ratios and sequences, and their engagement with the human body in motion. He was obsessed with ceremonial routes unfolding over time. Villa Mairea leads us from the curved portico, through the active spaces of the interior, past the cascade of stairs, and out again to sauna and curved pool – from the urbane façade to the vibrations of the forest in a sequence of framed views. Saynatsalo orchestrates a mounting promenade up the grassy steps, across the courtyard, then up the stairs, providing an indirect access to the main chamber with its stocky benches fashioned as Classical mouldings: appropriate for the citizens of a timber town. This sombre civic chamber makes subliminal allusions to both a sauna and an Ancient Greek state chamber. The transitions are guided by steps, railings and changes in the intensity of light.

One needs to recognize the 'aura' of Aalto's works, their haunting presence, their appeal to the senses as well as the mind. He read books of course, but his primary way of learning architecture and storing it in memory was through direct experience. He needed to see and feel the objects of history, even to touch them, while absorbing their spirit and atmosphere. He needed to sense the surrounding landscape or city including adjacent platforms, plazas, terraces, steps, fragments and vegetation. Sometimes he photographed, sometimes he sketched, but above all he interiorized in memory, and years later these inner images might fuse with other matters involved in the problem-solving process. Aalto was not alone in this passion for Ancient ruins of course. After all, Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923)

was not just a modernist manifesto, it was also a hymn to the Parthenon, a plea for a return to essentials in the past that must somehow be reinvigorated in a modern form. Among the primary lessons was that of the architectural promenade over the rocky terrain of the Acropolis. Unlike the stultified axial and symmetrical formulae of the Beaux Arts, this combined changing views of temples at diverse angles with views of the surrounding landscape. It was a lesson in the dynamics of perception.

Sketches were part of Aalto's method, although he also took occasional photographs. His first direct encounter with the Athenian Acropolis, the Theatre of Dionysias and the Theatre at Epidauros occurred in 1933 when he turned up late for the 4th CIAM Athens Congress of that year, which was supposedly devoted to problems of modern urbanism (resulting in the 'Charte d'Athènes'). To judge by his correspondence, he found these discussions rather dry and disappointing, so he pushed off to the Acropolis where he spent time lingering in the shade of the Parthenon columns. There are a few photographs from this excursion, especially of the Doric Order, and Aalto spent a lifetime reinventing Classical columns in concrete or steel with wood or ceramic bindings, his latter-day versions of fluting. There is a highly evocative and informative sketch of the Theatre at Epidauros drawn during the same trip. This focuses upon the seats with their scooped undersides providing room for the feet and aiding the reflection of sound. In this condensed sketch he captured the rhythms and proportions of the Antique theatre while also abstracting the section of stone seats and steps. There is even the trace of a human figure for scale. Then in the bottom right hand corner Aalto noted detailed measurements of the seating. In this manner he anchored this great Ancient masterpiece in his mind for later use.

It is in Aalto's works after the Second World War that the image and idea of the Ancient Greek theatre came fully into its own, especially in institutional buildings requiring a sense of civic assembly such as the University of Technology in Otaniemi, the House of Culture in Helsinki, Finlandia Hall, the Nordic Museum in Aalborg, Denmark, and the project for a Museum in Shiraz, Iran. His own atelier at Tillimäki included a delightful little grassy theatre at its heart as a place to sit and discuss, an image of an intimate academy or shared working community. But beyond such obvious echoes of Greek theatres there are the more abstract renditions of steps, levels, shelves and railings in numerous interiors with a theatrical aspect. Even the main reception areas of the Villa Mairea with the dramatic cascade of stairs frame social performance in their way. In his urban schemes, Aalto moulded the surrounding contours and layered the land as 'synthetic landscapes' (recalling the geological strata observed in Mantegna's paintings). Theatres and platforms provided compelling examples of shared ground and communal, public space. One is accustomed to Aalto's interest in the curved plans of ancient theatres, but he was just as interest-

ed in their section, in their orchestration of rhythmic horizontal levels of seats, steps and stages, attuned to human scale and movement.

Aalto took over the primary geometries of the Greek theatre type and fragmented them into splayed flanges and layers in a manner suggested in his abstract paintings. He also flipped the theatre form so that it included the view from actor to audience. In fact, he metamorphosed it into a fan radiating from a focal point of control looking outwards to ever expanding curves, a species of panopticon. One sees this in his numerous library designs. These tend to juxtapose rectangular elements for administration with expanding fan shapes for reading rooms on stepped levels. They are in effect inversions of theatres, flooded with light and providing controllable library and study spaces. Shelves, steps and seats are absorbed in an overall order through vitalized interlocking sections. His libraries are theatres of knowledge, places dedicated to intense study in books placed on shelves and tables: social landscapes for enlightenment. This concentration on the act of reading is already clear in the Viipuri Library where the top-lit spaces lined with shelves flow into one another, linked by shallow flights of stairs with railings which guide the hand and movement from one place to another. In post-war libraries such as the one at Rovaniemi or the one at Mount Angel in the USA, Aalto played out variations on similar themes.

So what is the status of Aalto's famous and very beautiful sketch of the Theatre at Delphi drawn in 1953, when he and Elissa spent nearly two weeks travelling around major Ancient Greek sites? By the time this was drawn, the main lines of the University of Technology in Otaniemi had long been established with the wedge-shaped transparent theatre as the focal point and chief symbolic idea. Alvar and Aino had conceived a modern university as a democratic urban landscape, and the early sketches reveal the intention of integrating surrounding platforms of land into the ensemble. The theatre steps up from the ground, becomes solid as an open-air theatre in stone, then rises further to become a series of strip windows in metal and glass, admitting light deep into the interiors of the lecture theatres. The composition is crowned by a tapered copper roof with two small temple images incised into it. This ascent is like a commentary on the origins of architecture, starting with land forms and rising through stone steps to an industrialized crown.

Throughout the University of Technology in Otaniemi, light is a key theme and it is admitted through a variety of skylights into lucid white interiors. Light and enlightenment, the marriage of Nordic light and the life of the mind: an image of education in an egalitarian society, modern, but somehow recalling the ancient academy. While the theatre forms the hinge and focal point of the scheme, the more neutral spaces for wide corridors, libraries and classrooms, are laid out in parallel bars forming

courtyards. At one extremity is the Department of Architecture with its own miniature inflected lecture theatres. In order to ennoble this part of the building, Aalto switched from the pervasive red brick to white marble on the exterior, yet another allusion to the Mediterranean world (and a cause for concern at Finlandia Hall where the marble plaques buckled in the cold). Architecture is concerned with the idealization of institutions, and the ensemble at Otaniemi comes across as a statement of optimism and social emancipation after the darkness and destruction of the Second World War, but it is not without nostalgia for a lost Golden Age.

This is where Aalto's metamorphosis of past architecture comes into play in a major way. There is an extraordinary sketch section of uncertain date through the Otaniemi theatre showing low winter light being captured by scoops then reflected down as rays into the two aulas or lecture halls below, which are partly buried in the ground. In delicate lines the drawing traces internal sight lines and explores the structural armature holding the whole thing up. To the top right of the sheet a doodled plan shows flanges converging on the stage, a fan shape in effect. At the bottom of the sheet, the theatre form is shown arising from and formalizing levels of ground. Those light scoops seem to recall the concave seats of Epidauros so succinctly captured in that sketch of 1933. Aalto liked the notion of 'visual acoustics' and in the section of the theatre at Otaniemi the reflection of low natural light off the suspended scoops replaces the reflection of sound off stone seats in the ancient example. Is there also the subliminal idea of a cranium receiving light through the 'eyes' of the glazed bands above the lecture halls? Asplund's library in Stockholm, which Aalto admired, had something of this meaning.

When Thomas Jefferson designed the University of Virginia in 1819, he placed the Rotunda Library at the head of the scheme, an obvious allusion to the Pantheon in Rome, as an emblem of universal knowledge. He disposed the faculty houses in symmetrical wings recalling Palladio's grander villas. The green sward between was referred to as 'the lawn' and was open at the end to the pastoral landscape. The ensemble conveyed the values of the new democratic republic: a state of gentleman farmers emancipated from the rule of the British Crown. The Aaltos' solution for Otaniemi was also highly charged with societal meaning but for a new technological society which nonetheless should be rooted in egalitarianism, humanism and a respect for nature. That small external stone amphitheatre says it all: a space of congregation open to all. This is surely linked to Aalto's ideal polis; like a fragment of an ancient city state transposed from the Mediterranean world to the far North. In works like this, as in the Saynatsalo Town Hall, Aalto succeeded in realizing a non-authoritarian, democratic monumentality, an architecture of social participation for a Welfare State.

And so one returns to the sketch drawn at Delphi in 1953. Rather than being a direct inspiration, it was perhaps a confirmation of qualities which Aalto had been pursuing for some time. It is a marvellous drawing which captures the way that the bowl of the theatre opens to the vast landscape beyond the site and draws it in, yet maintains a degree of enclosure. For Aalto, it seems, the ancient theatre was an urban building for performance and assembly, but also a formalized landscape of steps and levels, almost like a geological outcrop. The words 'culture' and 'agriculture' reinforce each other and at Delphi one senses that one is at the centre of something much bigger, a territory, even a universe. My guess is that Aalto was intrigued by the Delphic Oracle and the role of Delphi as a cosmopolitan centre of the Pan-Hellenic world. The theatre was but one stage along the ascending zigzag route past the temple and treasure houses of the Athenians and others, culminating with the stadium up above. The Greek drama itself had a revelatory function in the lives of men and women, with the Chorus speaking with the voices of Fate. Ultimately Aalto's sketch is of a sacred place, a locus of higher truths.

The theatre at Epidauros was also a part of a much more extensive sacred site, that of the healing sanctuary of Asclepius. Designed by Polykleitos the Younger in the 4th century BC, the theatre is distinguished by its geometrical perfection, its precision stone work, its subtle siting in the landscape, and its quality acoustics. The banks of seats focus on the stage and the lower slopes extend beyond the disk for performance in a manner that seems to pinch the circular disk below, an effect which probably intrigued Aalto who at Otaniemi also broke the exterior amphitheatre with diagonal flanges of walls. How I would have loved to have been there on both occasions, in 1933 and 1953, and to have listened to Aalto's reactions to this perfect creation, a fusion of geometry, rhythm and human scale. The theatre at Epidauros expresses the essence of drama and performance, combining the scale of the human body sitting, standing, grouped together, focused as a community on a shared ritual, and linked to sky and landscape. Multiple rhythms are coordinated in a coherent ensemble, a fusion of intellectual clarity and sculptural form.

But the ruins of Ancient Greece did not just hold out lessons on the design of individual buildings. They also demonstrated great skill in the placement of sequences of public monuments and outdoor spaces of assembly in the irregular topography along processional routes: temples, agoras, stadia, theatres. Aalto was acutely aware of the cumulative geometry of wooden Karelian farmhouses with their straggling out-houses, fences, poles, trees, angled paddocks and fields. Equally he was aware of the fragmented stone pieces of Ancient Greek ruins scattered across the landscape connecting buildings and the spaces between them. Both of these historical models, the Nordic peasant vernacular farmsteads in timber, and the non-finito

topographical order of ruined Greek sites in stone, provided primary inspirations in his creation of the 'synthetic landscapes' of his urban and institutional projects for Finland in the post-war years. Theatres were just part of it, for he also explored platforms, levels, contours and floating roofs penetrated by light.

Perhaps the origins of the theatre are to be found long before the emergence of a formalized building type such as the Ancient Greek theatre? Perhaps it all started with a ring of people attending a performance in an urban space? Or with a group of villagers involved in a ritual on a threshing floor or *area* in an open landscape of terraces with views to mountains and sea? The platform is one of the most basic of architectural gestures as it establishes a place with limits, while also opening to the surroundings and to landscape near and far. The platform may be urban or rural. Its geometry consolidates contours and agricultural terraces but it also forms the basis of city squares. And theatres, both their stages and their auditoria, are formalized terraces of a kind. This elemental meaning of platforms, this return to origins, is suggested by a passage in Rex Martienssen's *The Idea of Space in Greek Architecture* (1956):

"The creation of a level plane of reference in a practical context has wider significance than that of its purely 'useful' aspect in an architectural arrangement....A horizontal plane or a series of related horizontal planes is the first essential in any system of formal arrangement intended to embrace the activities of organized or collective life."³

Delphi encapsulates the harmony between a human creation and the landscape. Epidauros is timeless on account of its excellence as architecture but also because it solves the basic problems of the theatre as a type in a manner that would echo down the ages transcending changes in period and style. One is reminded that outstanding buildings occupy time in different ways, and that the history of architecture is partly composed from basic types that are replicated and reinterpreted through the ages. Aalto's fascination with the Ancient Greek theatres reveals his own research into fundamentals of the architectural art, but also his own elaboration of a mythical landscape expressing his ideal vision of society in communion with nature. His researches into theatre form remind us that the best of modern architecture has been radical in a full sense: revolutionary while returning to roots.

Endnotes

- 1 Alvar Aalto, 'Painters and Masons', *Jousimies*, 1921. Aalto's sentence seems to echo a passage in the Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:9: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun."

The present text extends a series of earlier investigations by the author of Aalto's architecture, running back to the exhibition catalogue *Boston: Forty Years of Modern Architecture* (1980) (which included drawings of Baker House, MIT) and the various editions of *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (1982, 1987, 1996). In 1989 I visited Aalto's Mount Angel Library in Oregon and it made a deep impression. My interest in Aalto intensified after my first visit to Finland in summer 1991 as contributor to the 5th Alvar Aalto Symposium 'Functionalism – Utopia or the Way Forward?' with an intervention 'The Idea of a Modern Tradition' (published in the proceedings, Alvar Aalto Symposium, Jyväskylä, 1992, p. 120 ff) which included an interpretation of Saynatsalo Town Hall. A string of texts followed such as: 'Concepts and Continuities: Finnish Architecture of the 1980s', *Finland Builds*, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 1992, p. 10 ff; 'Modern Architecture, Mythical Landscapes and Ancient Ruins', *The Annual Soane Lecture*, Soane Museum, London, 1997; 'Modernism, Nature Tradition: Alvar Aalto's Mythical Landscapes', *Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings, Interpretations of an Architect's Work*, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 1998, p. 131 ff; 'Alvar Aalto, Paysages Mythiques', *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, February 1998, no 315, p. 4 ff; 'Entre Art et Tradition, Alvar Aalto, Maison Louis Carré, 1956-63', *Alvar Aalto, Maison Louis Carré*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, 2008, p. 6ff; 'Marking Time at the Villa Mairea', *Theory Free Zone*, 29/9/2012, *Kristian Gullichsen's 80th Birthday*, Helsinki, 2012, p. 132 ff.

It is also worth mentioning two Curtis exhibitions in Finland accompanied by publications: 'Mental Landscapes/Mielen Maisemia', *Drawings and Paintings by William J.R. Curtis*, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 2000, with Curtis's Introduction 'Notes on Abstraction' and Juhani Pallasmaa's Preface, 'Mindscapes'; and 'Structures of Light, Photographs by William J. R. Curtis', Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, 2007, with Curtis's Introduction, 'The Shadows of Time'. In their different ways, these dealt with abstraction as a way of concentrating experience and distilling meaning. I place great emphasis on the architectural work itself, the anatomy of intentions, the realm of architectural ideas, and Aalto's transformations of nature and tradition through abstraction. Sketches and photographs may also be interpretive and analytical, such as my sketch of the theatre structure at Otaniemi, drawn rapidly in 1981 during my first trip to Finland included with this text.

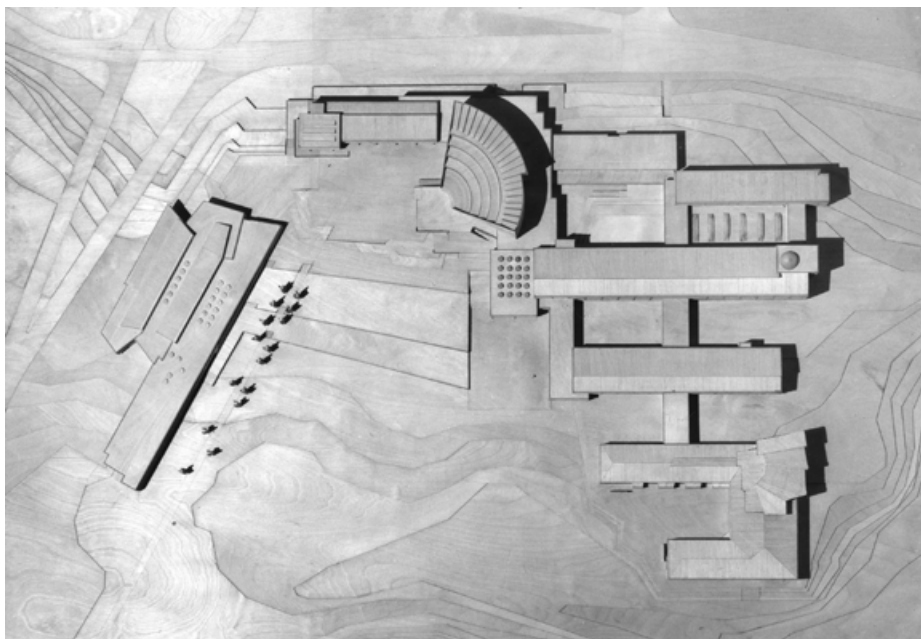
- 2 Amédée Ozenfant, *The Foundations of Modern Art*, English Edition, Brewer, Warren and Putnam Inc, New York, 1931; original French edition, 1925.
- 3 Rex Martienssen, *The Idea of Space in Greek Architecture*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1956, p. 3 ff. My deep interest in Greek theatres goes back to 1966 when, during a Mediterranean hitch-hiking trip, I first experienced Epidauros and was completely captivated by it, an obsession that has never left me. In the early 1970s I had an intense dialogue on the nature of theatres with Denys Lasdun, who had just designed the National Theatre in London. Some of these ideas were published in Curtis, *A Language and a Theme: the Architecture of Denys Lasdun and Partners*, RIBA, London, 1976. See also Curtis, *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*, Phaidon, London, 1994. In the late 1970s there were several trips to Greece and Asia Minor studying major theatre sites, including Athens, Epidauros, Ithomi, Priene, Bergama, Miletus; Delphi came later. In the 1980s, attention shifted to major platform and pyramid sites in Mexico, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal, all places with a theatrical aspect. There are many sketchbooks devoted to analysis of these ancient sites during these travels.

Konstantinos Xanthopoulos, *Alvar Aalto and Greece: Trailing Ariadne's Thread*, Melissa, Athens, 2019, contains valuable documented information on the chronology of Aalto's visits to Greek sites in 1933 and 1953, as well as an insightful text by Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Alvar Aalto's Cultural Synthesis'. The main text by Xanthopoulos also explores the impact of the Delphic Festival of 1930 and other Hellenic reinterpretations of history which may have influenced the way that Ancient Greek ruins were perceived when Aalto made his journeys. It seems that Aalto was also very interested in the island of Delos and the legends linking the place to the birth of Apollo-Helios, Sun God of Daylight. Delos was a sacred centre in the Ancient Hellenic world and this may have appealed to Aalto's pan-cultural sentiments. A recent letter from Tom Simons (who revisited the Greek sites in 2017 with copies of Aalto's sketches in hand) suggests convincingly that the 1933 sketch by Aalto usually described (by Göran Schildt, Aalto's biographer, and others) as being of the Theatre of Dionysias in Athens, is in fact of the Theatre at Epidauros, and I agree with him. For a more general reflection on platforms and terraces, particularly in Pre-Columbian architecture in Mexico and Peru, see Curtis 'Platform and Horizon', in *Arkinka*, Lima, Peru, 2007.

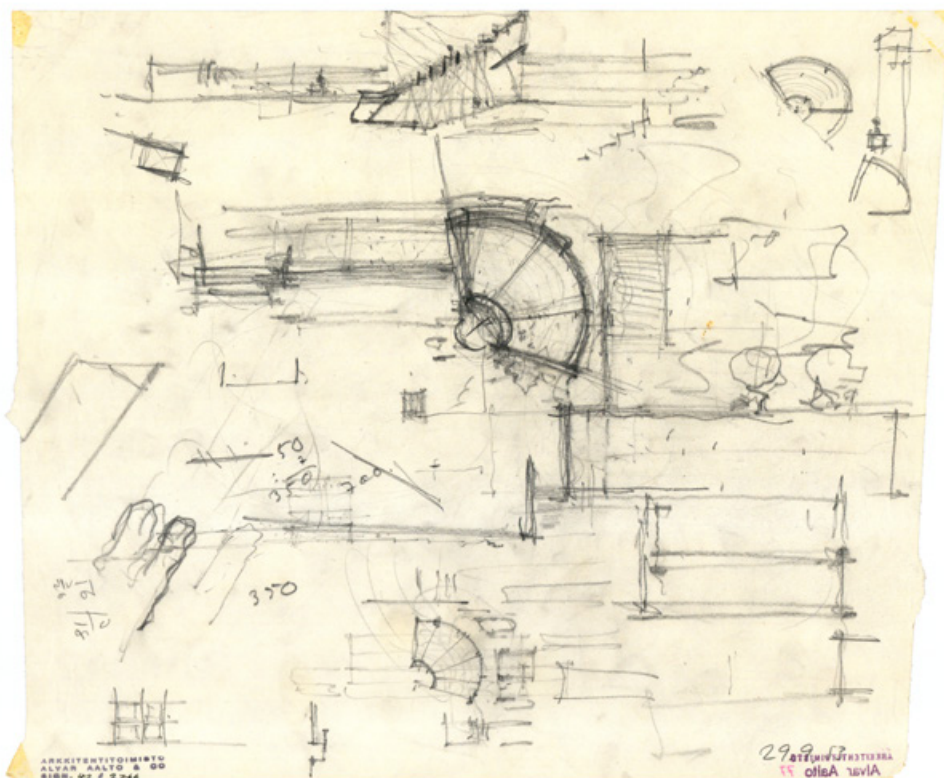
Figures



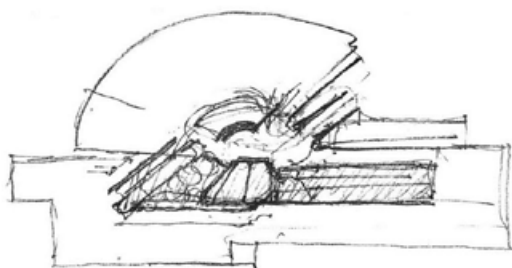
1. Alvar Aalto, University of Technology Otaniemi, exterior of the main lecture halls in the form of a wedge-shaped theatre. Stratification an levels rising from land, to stone, to metal and glass.
Photo: Maija Holma, 2013. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



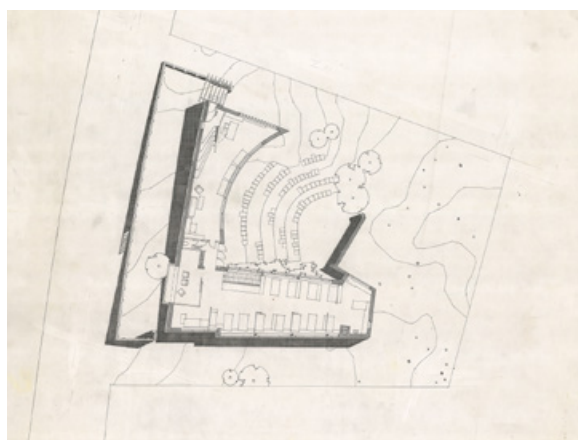
2. Otaniemi, wooden study model showing contours and modelling of land forms into platforms.
Photo: Eva and Pertti Ingervo, 1960s. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



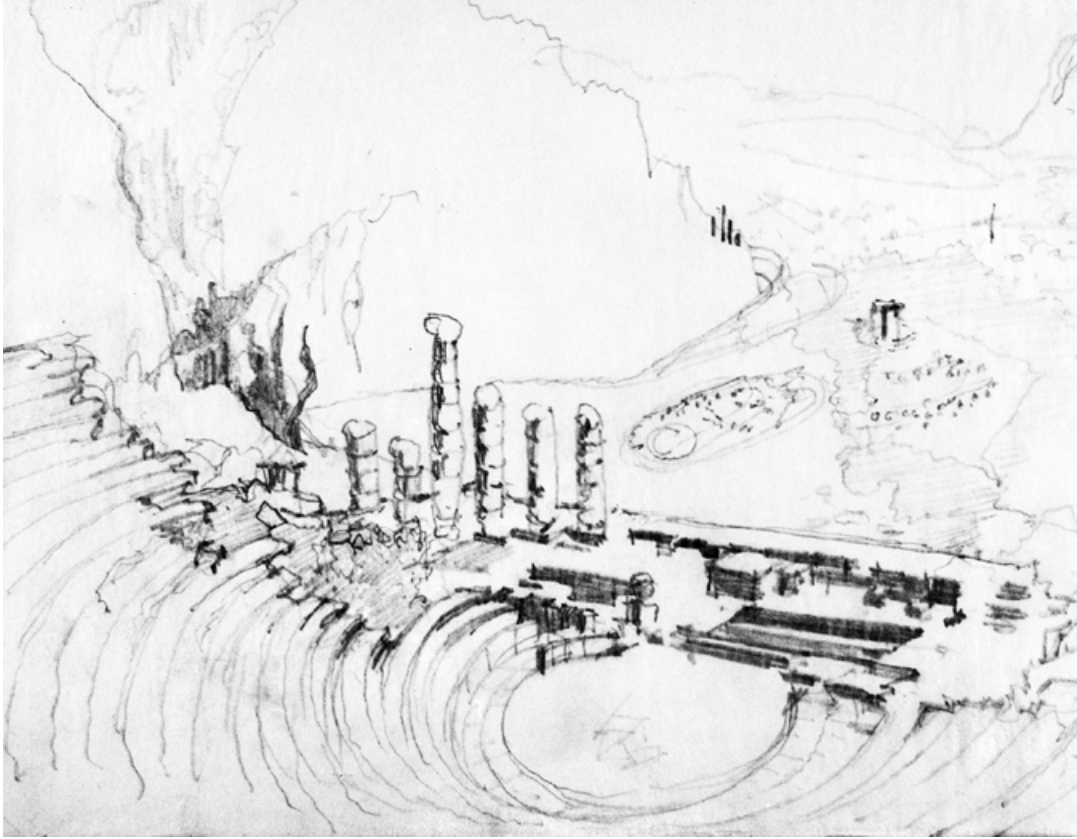
3. Alvar Aalto, Otaniemi, sketches showing the emergence of central ideas of the project: the creative process in action. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



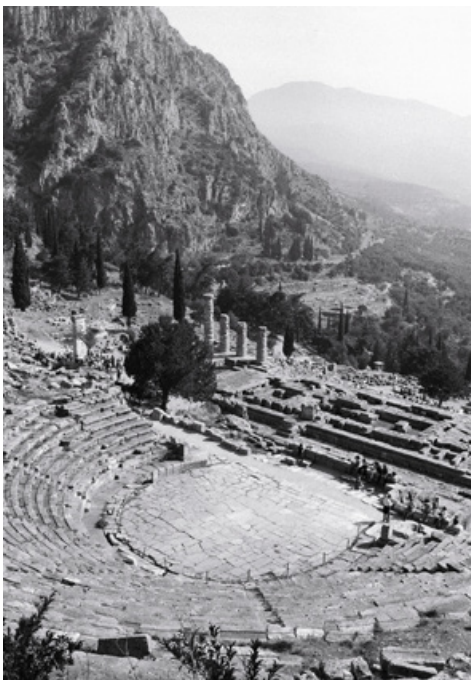
4. Alvar Aalto, Library at Rovaniemi, formative sketch showing fan shaped reading space fused with rectangular volumes for other functions.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation



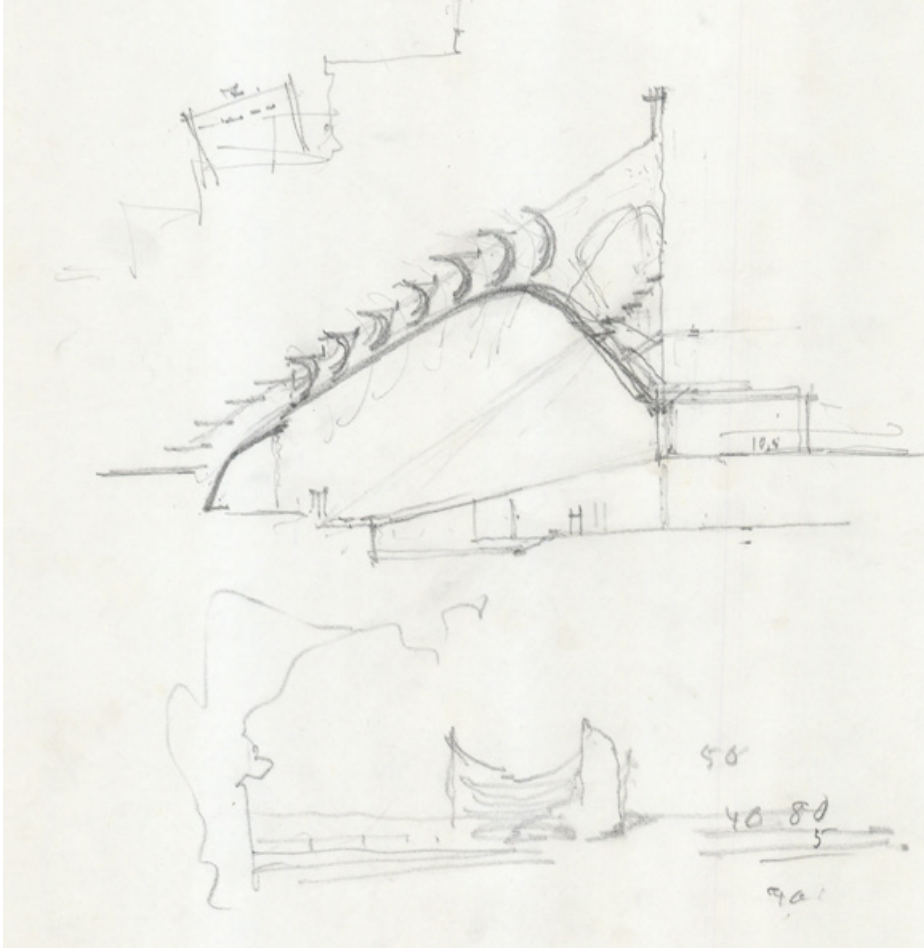
5. Alvar Aalto, Atelier at Tillimäki, plan showing spatial complexity of figure and ground, and position of outdoor theatre at the heart of the scheme.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation



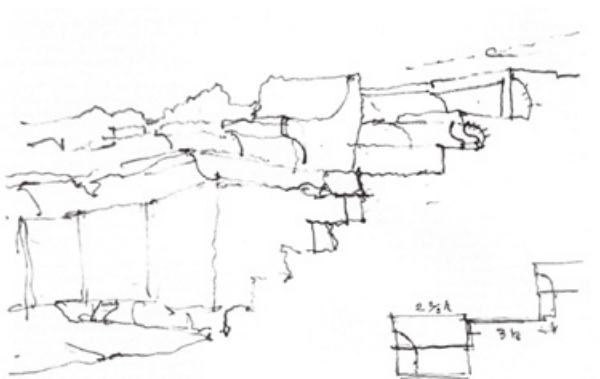
6. Alvar Aalto, sketch of theatre and landscape at Delphi, 1953. The architect's passion for ancient ruins and the world of Antique Greece. © Alvar Aalto Family



7. Theatre at Delphi seen from above.
Photo: WJR Curtis 2004.



8. Alvar Aalto, sketch section through main lecture hall showing light rays being reflected down into interior and sight lines towards stage. The architect thus defines several generating ideas of the scheme as a theatre of light. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



9. Alvar Aalto, close-up sketch the Theatre at Epidauros focusing on the profiles of the seats and their dimensions. The anatomy of an Ancient Greek theatre. © Alvar Aalto Family

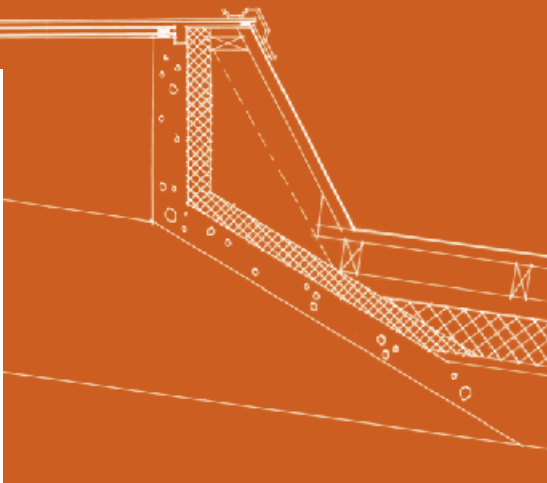


10. Otaniemi, WJR Curtis, sketch distilling theatre form, profiles and levels of platforms, 1991.



11. Epidauros, banks of seats in stone, Ancient architecture with an almost geological inevitability.
Photo: WJR Curtis, 1996.

C o n c e p t s



Lari Ala-Pöllänen

Lari Ala-Pöllänen is a practicing architect currently working as an architectural group manager at Granlund. He studied architecture at The Welsh School of Architecture at Cardiff University in 2013-16 and later completed his studies at the University of Oulu in 2020. He has previously written articles on the architecture of Juha Leiviskä published in the Finnish Architectural Review.

POSTSCRIPTS

Lari Ala-Pöllänen

Introduction

Although Alvar Aalto had been at the forefront of Anglo-American architectural theory and writing ever since the publication of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1966, there was a renewed interest in Aalto's work following his death in 1976. Demetri Porphyrios and Colin St John Wilson were two of the key figures involved in this post-mortem examination of Aalto's work: Wilson was one of the key speakers in the first Alvar Aalto Symposium in 1979 and Porphyrios in the second in 1982. Both were also key speakers in the Alvar Aalto seminar held in 1981 at the Barcelona School of Architecture ETSAB.^{1/2}

I will examine the writers' interpretations of Aalto's ideas, concentrating on two works, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (1982) by Porphyrios and *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project* (1995) by Wilson.

Porphyrios

The main thesis of Porphyrios is that Aalto not only drifted away from orthodox Modernism, but that his thinking was founded on fundamentally different ideas to begin with. According to Porphyrios, Aalto's thinking was based on the same concepts as the traditionalist architecture of the late 19th and early 20th century movements: utilization of archetypal historicist motives and types, imitation of nature, and urbanist ideas ranging from Camillo Sitte to Die Stadtkrone.

Porphyrios derives from a considerably wide array of sources to contextualize Aalto's thinking within the wider context of the late 19th and early 20th century intellectual landscape of Finland and Scandinavia. Although Aalto's texts are cited widely, two references recurring in the concluding chapter seem to be of particular importance. The first one is from the article *Painters and Masons*, published in 1921, where Aalto reflects on the permanence and lasting value of motives recurring in different forms throughout the ages: "*Nothing old is ever reborn. But it never completely disappears either. And anything that has ever been, always re-emerges in another form.*"³

The other recurring quotation is from Aalto's article "In lieu of an article", published in 1958, where he strongly criticizes the post-war formal experimentation: "*Grown-up children play with curves and tensions which they do not control.*"⁴

After a somewhat complicated line of thinking, Porphyrus arrives at an interesting conclusion: Aalto references classical motifs in the same way as classical architecture derived from natural forms and morphology. In Porphyrus' opinion, referencing Aalto therefore becomes inconceivable: at some point the chain of referencing becomes too long, and the link to the original unspoiled reference (the nature) is lost in translation. Instead, Porphyrus argues, we would be better off starting from a *tabula rasa*.⁵

Porphyrus doesn't proceed to explain what exactly he means by the elusive statement made in the last sentence of his book, but his own later work provides a clue: The Pavilion at Battery Park City in New York, constructed in 1992 (some ten years after the publication of the book), is a study in the origins of classical forms. (Fig. 1) Porphyrus was quite serious about his case and didn't refer to *tabula rasa* as a mere provocation. He suggests we shouldn't simply return to the past, but rather we should learn to recreate the process of development that originally led to the creation of classical architecture. Porphyrus isn't only theorizing about the primitive hut, he went on to build one in an attempt to reconnect with the lost roots of traditionalist forms.

Wilson

Although Wilson's material is considerably narrower, he too relies on key quotations from Aalto that are referred to repeatedly. The first chapter of *The Other Tradition* begins with a quotation from Aalto's speech given upon receiving the RIBA Gold Medal in 1957: "*The architectural revolution, like all revolutions, begins with enthusiasm and ends in some form of dictatorship.*"⁶ Wilson attended Aalto's lecture in person, and it came to mark an important turning point in his architectural thinking.

Wilson too thinks there is something fundamentally wrong about orthodox modernism, but hasn't quite lost his faith in the Modern project altogether. Instead, he sees value in the *Other Tradition*, the opposition within the Modern movement as exemplified by architects like Hugo Häring, Hans Scharoun and, crucially, Alvar Aalto.

Wilson's thinking is perhaps best summarized in a statement made in commentary to Paul Rudolph's notion about Modernists being quite selective about the problems they choose to solve: "*Nothing can be left out (pace Rudolph) because it*

is too awkward to be accommodated; each component must have its place and its identity be given due presence in the whole. This is the vitality of the life itself.”⁷

Wilson’s conviction in arguing for his holistic paradigm is commendable but invites a number of objections. Is nothing really too awkward to be accommodated? Isn’t it a crucial part of an architect’s (often thankless) task to identify the most important design considerations, and prioritize their accommodation accordingly? Surely, some underlying sense of order has value and merits, and its pursuit is often beneficial, even if it happens at the slight cost of accommodating every single component?

Wilson spent the better part of his professional career working on a single public project, the new British Library in London. The building presented Wilson with an opportunity to apply many of his ideas in practice. Invariably, many of the critiques of his theoretical ideas apply almost directly to the built work.

The library opened to a moderately positive, albeit muted response. An article by Francis Morrone sums up the sentiment at the time: *“I don’t like the exterior of Wilson’s building, but I respect the effort.”⁸* (Fig. 2)

Wilson has indeed made every conceivable effort to adjust and adapt the vast mass of the building to its surroundings, whilst accommodating a wide array of programmatic considerations. But one cannot help but get the feeling that he is slightly at a loss when it comes to genuinely connecting with the urban context. And what about the appearance of the building itself? This is a building that does everything and anything to try to diminish itself, whilst almost completely omitting portraying any kind of original architectural character: a truly British library, dare I say.

The interior with its soaring daylight spaces is a different story. Even Morrone admitted the merits of the interiors, which he described as: *“Marimekko chic on a cosmic scale, and not displeasing for that.”⁹* (Fig. 3)

The concluding chapter of *The Other Tradition* again begins with a motto borrowed from Aalto: *“It is not what a building looks like on the day it is opened but what it is like thirty years later that matters.”¹⁰* Wilson’s British Library achieved a Grade I listing status in 2015, only some 20 years after its completion. Thus, one could argue his magnum opus passed the test set by his master.

Conclusion

Both Porphyrios and Wilson have (correctly) identified the idea of lasting eternal values as a key theme in Aalto's thinking. They nonetheless draw considerably different conclusions from it and see a radically different way forward: For Wilson the "Other Tradition" is indeed an unfinished project and a continuously viable strategy, whereas Porphyrios sees it better to start from a clean slate.

It does strike somewhat surprising that Porphyrios' argumentation is in many ways more original and in some ways more convincing than that of Wilson. It is interesting to note that Wilson, both in his theoretical writing and architectural work, primarily referenced Aalto's ideas from the brief post-war period during which Aalto's red-brick buildings reflected Aalto's humanist and classical ideals. Towards the end of his life, Aalto was already drifting towards a rather different direction, marked by cool and frugal monumentalism.

The starkly different interpretations raise questions about the value and motives of these intellectual endeavours. Did Wilson and Porphyrios really learn a great deal from Aalto's texts, or did their citations serve as a mere legitimization of their own preconceived ideas? And perhaps more importantly, are Aalto's texts really the unexplored treasure trove of ideas whose breadth of genius we still don't fully understand? Or are they mere ramblings of an artist who didn't really have the consistency to fully develop and mature his ideas to an applicable theory?

Of course, the value of Aalto's texts is at the same time also their curse. His ideas are indeed endlessly versatile, ambiguous, open-ended, and multifaceted. Wilson's and Porphyrios's intellectual efforts do still hold value today and provide us with a lesson: any scholar of architectural thought will always find traces of their own ideas in their subjects.

Endnotes

- 1 Alvar Aalto Foundation, "Alvar Aalto Symposium": <https://www.alvaraalto.fi/en/services/seminars/alvar-aalto-symposium/> (accessed 1.2.2021)
- 2 Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, "Alvar Aalto i la difusió del Moviment Modern: Alvar Aalto. Taula rodona II": <https://zonavideo.upc.edu/video/61a90aae0210807cd25d0f29> (accessed 1.2.2026)
- 3 Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 113.
- 4 Ibid., 115.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Colin St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 23.
- 7 Ibid., 99.
- 8 Francis Morrone, "More smirk than Smirke: Colin Wilson's new British Library", *The New Criterion*, Vol. 16, Iss. 8 (2015), 75: <https://newcriterion.com/article/more-smirk-than-smirke-colin-wilsons-new-british-library/> (accessed 1.2.2026)
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture*, 175.

Figures



1. The Battery Park City Pavilion (1992) by Demetri Porphyrios.
Photo: Beyond My Ken. © Wikimedia Commons



2. The British Library (1995) by Colin St John Wilson.
 Photo: fsse8info. © Wikimedia Commons



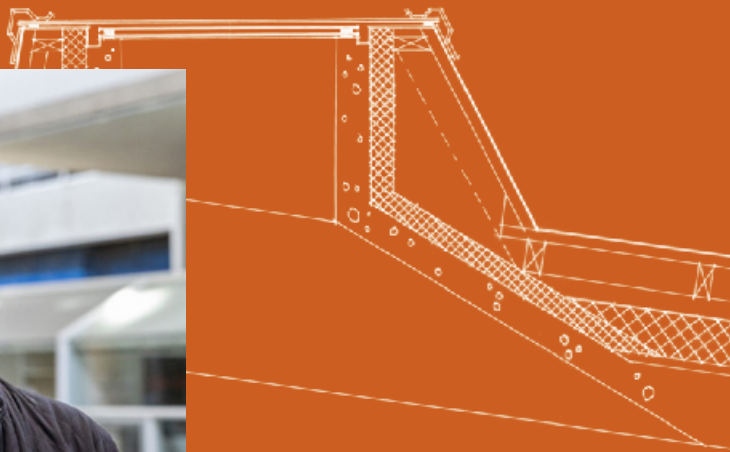
3. The British Library entrance hall.
 Photo: Jps3. © Wikimedia Commons

4. Pallant House Gallery (2006)
by Wilson.
Photo: Jim Osley.
© Wikimedia Commons



5. Ann's Court Building (2003) by Porphyrios.
Photo: T-sentence. © Wikimedia Commons

C o n c e p t s



Brian M. Ambroziak

Brian Ambroziak is an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Tennessee. His research engages the creative process, the development of the artistic conscience, and focuses on the complex relationship between design and methods of representation and visualization. His publications include Michael Graves: *Images of a Grand Tour* (2005) and *Infinite Perspectives: Two Thousand Years of Three Dimensional Mapmaking* (1999) with Princeton Architectural Press. He and his partner Katherine Ambroziak have been finalists in design competitions that include the National World War II Memorial and a design for St. Mark's Coptic Canadian Village. In 2008, Brian Ambroziak co-founded time[scape]lab with Andrew McLellan. The theoretical designs of time[scape]lab offer a unique framework for considering architecture, both in terms of its representation and its physical existence. The office's methods of representation rely heavily upon systems of two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and four-dimensional montage embracing fragmentary strategies that allow for open-ended interpretation and bias the acts of writing and collage.

THE SKIN AND THE EYES

Brian M. Ambroziak

BIRCH (noun)

1: any of a genus (*Betula* of the family Betulaceae, the birch family) of monoecious deciduous trees or shrubs having simple petiole leaves and typically a *layered membranous outer bark that peels readily* (italics mine to emphasize the connection to layers and collage).

It is common in some cultures to say that a photograph speaks a thousand words. Such expressions must surely have been inspired by images such as this one of a middle-aged Aalto (Fig. 1). In the photograph, one understands the essence of the architect, a collagist that carefully peels back layers of material from brick to copper to wood to glass to reveal natural forms that blend seamlessly with their landscape. The thick hands in the photograph are those of the worker, but more than that they are intertwined, connected, and structural. Hung from a dapperly designed suit, they become part of a layered and carefully designed collage. To parallel the hands, the architect's most important instrument, a relief sculpture hangs in a compositionally pleasing location above the artist's right shoulder. The composition is formed by layers of his native birch, the material that would ultimately define the tectonic expression of his architecture. I argue that the forest and the single birch tree were so engrained in Aalto's "artistic conscience", as portrayed in this portrait, that it was only a matter of time—after his honeymoon and an obsession with Asplund (Workers Club, 1924), his studies of Le Corbusier (Sanatorium, 1933)—that the forest had to enter his architecture (Villa Mairea, 1939). But it is of the year 1955 that the photograph speaks, the year when Aalto, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, would "Become who you are!"

The history of architecture is bound by time and is part of a continuum upon which we all operate. In the life of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), we experience an icon who grew up in an era prior to mass media, when the images of a single magazine could possess you, a time of unimaginable conflicts, where a white flag hidden in a wagon could be one's redemption, and a period where one could outlast one's own creative genius; a phenomena that unfortunately happens far too often within a profession that privileges a cult of the new. Alvar Aalto grew up in a time where one's place was perceptually grand, a time when history was not ingested on a two-dimensional screen but lived in a time in which the architect raised his fist in the air with intention. Aalto's training occurred when drawings were realized with a sharp

graphite led, images that were not continuously zoomed in and out upon. They were stable compositional works constructed at a single scale. To appreciate Alvar Aalto's oeuvre requires that one not only study the physical architecture but ingest the process. And to ask the question, "What images formed his artistic conscience and how were these store-housed thoughts synthesized into metaphorically and programmatically rich spaces integrated into their respective landscapes?"

The legacy of Alvar Aalto is incredibly complex, to say the least. As such, I respect my vantage point of such a profoundly significant force within design as an outsider: both culturally and generationally. As such, I ask that the Finnish design community provide me latitude as my conversations with the legendary designer Alvar Aalto, occurring over the course of five years on summer afternoon lunches in the courtyards of Aalto University, are the mere speculations of a formalist and mass consumer of all things made beautiful through the hand of the artist and architect. Or perhaps it should be the other way around according to the one in which I reflect upon in this brief essay. Perhaps my relationship is best understood in the literary fashion described by Borges when he wrote, "A book is a physical object in a world of physical objects. It is a set of dead symbols. And then the right reader comes along, and the words—or rather the poetry behind the words, for the words themselves are mere symbols—spring to life, and we have a resurrection of the word."¹

Aalto's interest in his homeland and its unique context is a constant throughout his life and cannot be understated. The biographer Göran Schildt frames this connection endlessly in his three-part autobiography as well as associated works. It is true, Aalto was very much in tune with the unique identity and landscapes that surrounded him as a citizen of Finland. It is towards this landscape that I will direct the reader; the most unique quality of which is the birch tree. These columns of white line the forests and neighborhoods and yield an unmistakable identity. They represent an abstraction of the modernist interior, a seemingly infinite field of scarred piloti. To escape them or even eliminate them from one's subconscious as a designer in this native land seems highly improbable. Not only did Alvar Aalto turn to them for his furniture, I believe that their expression can also be uniquely appreciated in the collaged and layered quality of his facades.

House and Studio (1955)

In the plan for the Aalto studio, the forest encroaches on the outdoor amphitheater and waits for its moment to infiltrate the interior space. The wall inflects as if preparing for the moment or perhaps even inviting nature inward. In the accompanying photo, that moment has taken place, and one observes the coexistence of outside

and inside (Fig. 2). Such moments clearly reinforce a desire by Aalto to pull his native landscape into his architecture and more broadly into his process and his ways of thinking about the articulation of one's environment. On the outside of the studio, at the main entry, is another moment where the two begin to blend. The entry drive is positioned between a birch grove and a wonderfully articulated facade that abstracts the birch in an almost too literal manner. The white stucco serves as the first layer, a second layer reveals the honey-stained garage doors, and then the third layer, like the collaged elevations of the university buildings, is the darker layer of the window mullions and glazing (Fig. 3).

Helsinki University of Technology, Otaniemi “Aalto University” (1949–74)

Alvar Aalto placed the highest value on the architectural drawing. “God made paper for drawing architecture on. Everything else is – at least to me – a misuse of paper. ‘Torheit’ [foolishness] as Zarathustra would say.”² While he seldom discussed the evolution of his artistic conscience (something about giving away the tricks of the trade), certain connections can be established through close examination of the actual drawings, elements that surrounded him and were distinctly Finnish, and artistic trends that he would have been following closely as an art critic for *Keskisuomalainen* and *Ilta-lehti* (1920s). His drawings, that were primarily dependent on plan and facade, were heavily influenced by his interest in art, early friendships like the one established with Maholy-Nagy, who would be known for his layered transparencies and collages, as well as the early conceptual design for the Turin Sanomat building (1929) where giant enlargements of the newspaper were applied to the glass. Such layered elevations are highly tactile, to the point where they acquire obvious connections to collage. The collagist's blade is that of the surgeon. Cutting through flesh, the collagist assembles layers in a precise manner. Similarly, Aalto typically treats brick as his primary first layer. At times, in the Aalto University campus, the initial metaphorical skin is Carrara marble. This initial material choice is cut to reveal layers of copper, wood, and glass. Subtracting from the primary facade, Aalto creates a hierarchical dialogue between surface and opening that varies; a window opening might be considered secondary to an entry but still receives the same subtractive process (Fig. 4).

At the university, what first captures one's gaze is the dominance of brick in the masses that form the array of courtyards within. However, whereas a typical architect would appreciate the advantage of such a contrast—mass against void—Aalto exhibits exact precision as he cuts mass to establish the brick as a mere layer or skin placed above layers of copper, wood, and glass. One is surrounded by an end-

less series of collages. And to heighten the materiality of the brick as a collaged layer, he constantly cuts it away as such.

This is a significant move that is only heightened by the application of the white Carrara marble in the courtyard of the Department of Architecture and the edges that contain the auditorium. But the nature of the material and its sincere application do not yield a Rowe and Slutzsky game of phenomenal transparency. The Carrara marble is a skin, the skin of a tree whose head was intended to be laid gently at its feet. Similar in an obvious manner to the layering of the birch tree where a thin protective layer of white is often pulled back to reveal several layers of varying color and contrast.

There is something unique to Aalto's architecture that allows one to appreciate it at the most human scale, as if they are in a gallery reviewing works of art. This theme is clearly one that Aalto desired in his belief that art must now transition to the scale and in the service of architecture. Aalto saw himself as an artist whose final compositions happened to be inhabited ones.

The Skin and the Eyes

For the aspiring student and practicing architect, Aalto's architecture serves as a reminder of meaningful aspirations: the significance of the tangible nature of drawing. His emphasis on plan and collage, perhaps stemming from the forests and the peeling birch by which he was surrounded and therefore embedded in his "artistic conscience," play a significant role in how he conceived space as a series of facades. His participation within the continuum of history, where the artform of collage was prevalent and connections with artists such as Léger and Moholoy-Nagy were common, made for a highly artistic architecture that was compositionally legible. An investigation into Alvar Aalto's process, one intensely impacted by collage, becomes even more critical if we address the design of the facade in a highly tactile manner. If the design of his facades exist at one end of the spectrum, Aalto's stitching together of these surfaces into a three-dimensional symphony is equally important. In the digital era, the importance of such an argument comes not from the tactile experience of space but from the tactile act of making: the cutting and the assembling—the surgical precision of the collagist that adds and subtracts to create orthographic projection. Simply put, Aalto's process biases the two-dimensional surface or the skin; the participant's eyes then serve as the instrument that combine his collaged tactile surfaces into three-dimensional poetry.

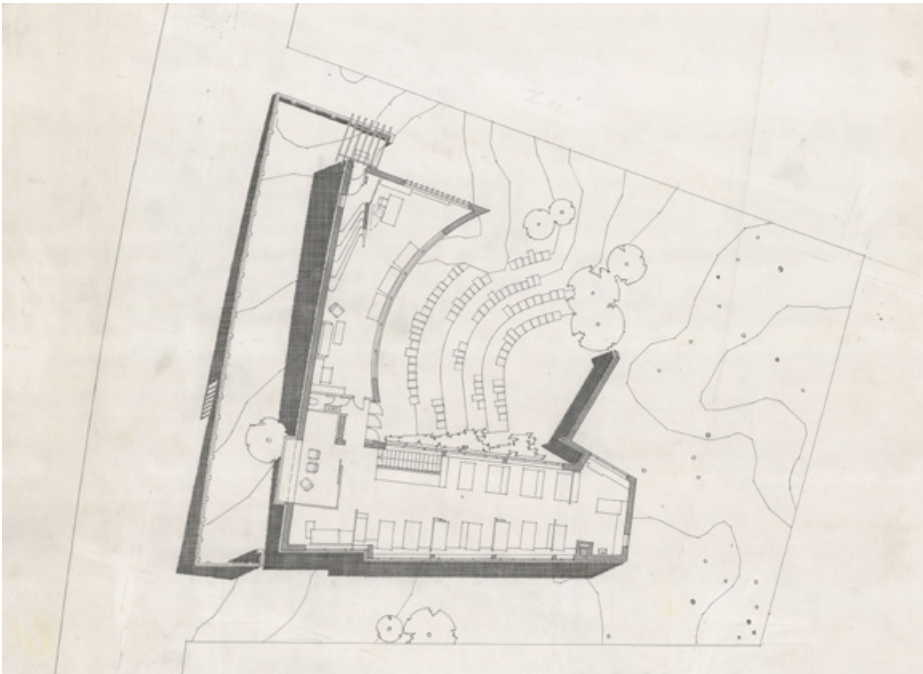
Endnotes

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4.
- 2 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Kirmo Mikkola's Aalto in Context: *An Insider's Perspective*', in *Alvar Aalto in the Finnish Context*. Kirmo Mikkola. ed. Aino Niskanen, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Gareth Griffiths (London: Routledge, 2025), xxii.

Figures



1. Portrait of Alvar Aalto.
Photo: Aili Heinonen, 1930s. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



2. Alvar Aalto Studio. Plan and interior space.
 Photo: Maija Holma, 1997. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



3. Alvar Aalto Studio. Birch tree in the forest, garage door, and protective white layering.
Photo: © Author



4. Diagram illustrating six primary elevational cuts at Aalto University.
Photo: © Author

5. Aalto University. Layering of brick, copper, wood, and glazing -collage
Photo: © Author



C o n c e p t s



Angela Amoia

Angela Amoia is a partner at Amoia Cody Architecture and an Adjunct Associate Professor of Architecture at the New York Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Design. She has balanced professional practice and teaching since earning her Master of Science in Advanced Architectural Design from the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, where she initiated her research on Alvar Aalto. Amoia has taught architectural history, theory, and design studios—including comprehensive design studios—and has participated in study-abroad programs in Italy, Germany, and Scandinavia as an intellectual historian with a focus on architecture and urban culture. In professional practice, she has served as an architectural project manager on a wide range of projects, including skyscrapers, large-scale academic facilities, landmark mixed-use developments, and adaptive-reuse residential work at both internationally and locally recognized New York City firms. Amoia and her partner, Robert Cody, co-authored the *NYC Green Density Zoning Handbook* (2018), *Alvar Aalto and the Future of Architecture* (2022), and *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design* (2025), reflecting their integrated approach to design, sustainability, and technology.

A FINNISH TOWN IN AMERICA

Angela Amoia

The *American Town in Finland* and *Finland as a Model for World Development* were concepts Aalto used to advance the integration of building and urban design. These experiments were not intended to transplant national identity, but to extract and adapt principles for community formation. Here, I will present the idea of a Finnish Town in America by developing Aalto's abstract concept of community by revisiting the context of the American Town in Finland, drawn during Finland's reconstruction following the Soviet invasion in 1939. Today, many countries face their own forms of reconstruction, whether through climate action, the rapid adoption of AI, or political volatility and aversion.

For Aalto, the abstract concept of community emerged from a belief that people and towns must be able to “grow” into the context of everyday life—the neighborhood scale of home, work, and shared civic structure. The *Growing House* was developed during Aalto's appointment as a Research Professor at MIT in 1940, with funding from the Bemis Foundation.¹ This teaching laboratory, with the earlier experiments for industrial worker settlement in Varkaus and Sunila, as well as this collaborative model of democracy and industry, advanced Finland's first strategic regional plan, the Kokemäenjoki plan. Together, these efforts framed settlement as a living system in which industry and community could evolve in place.

Although the MIT laboratory lasted only ten days, interrupted by the ongoing conflict in Finland, it left a lasting impression on Aalto and shaped his later planning and reconstruction research. It resulted in a pamphlet, disseminated by the Finnish Consulate in New York for American distribution, titled *Post-War Reconstruction: Rehousing Research in Finland*. The publication outlined typologies for implementing *flexible standardization* through the Growing House model and its “communal skeleton,” presenting an “experimental” town as a civic instrument rather than a fixed master plan.

The Growing House, Growing Town, and Growing Region brought multiple scales of thought into a single framework. Together, multivariant types and scales of adaptability could produce density without pushing outward into defined green or open spaces. In this way, suburban and urban life were tied together, not as half-built sprawl set against leftover nature, but as a continuous system capable of growth in place.

An Aalto sketch—that we have redrawn and labeled “half-earth”—aligns with this broader concept of community, in which the balance between building and nature is essential to people. The diagram can be read as a constellation of towns forming a connected system: an interwoven regional field of settlements, production zones, and landscapes functioning together. In this sense, Aalto’s urbanism becomes regenerative not through monumentality but through relational structure—settlement as a network, not an object. (Fig. 1)

Between 1939 and 1945, the Aaltos presented Finland to America through their exhibitions at MoMA and the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair. He was surprised that their bentwood furniture sparked more interest than his buildings. For the 1939 World’s Fair, he understood the pavilion could not be a literal representation of “Finnishness”. Aalto wrote: “A true image of a country cannot be conveyed with individual objects alone; it can be done convincingly only by the atmosphere such objects create together, that is, only by the overall effect perceived by the senses.”

This atmospheric strategy shaped perception and oriented visitors toward a social imagination of Finland—one that linked sensory experience to culture. Yet Aalto believed flexible standards: systems capable of supporting both individual difference and collective continuity are true representations of democracy. He emphasized that an architect’s best tool is not formal composition or material symbolism, but the ability to listen and then translate a community’s needs into spatial and material matters.

Finnish American enclaves across the United States provided Aalto with a living context for how “Finnishness” was resettled abroad. One such neighborhood is in Brooklyn, New York, where Finnish Americans built the first not-for-profit co-op building in New York State.²

In 1944, Aalto was asked to design a new façade for a church in Finntown, bringing Finland’s “forest dreaming” into the streetscape. (Fig. 2) The intervention marked a threshold between sacred and profane and would transform everyday urban life through an atmosphere of nature. Rather than just exporting a Nordic aesthetic, Aalto pursued a civic and infrastructural logic: a scaffold for nature and an armature for culture capable of adaptation, continuity, and shared life.³

Aalto did not recognize Americans in the spectacle of the fairgrounds, but in a tradition of democratic experimentation, where practical methods were deployed to expand opportunity at both individual and collective scales. He found this most clearly in New Deal policy, particularly the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which

he understood as a meaningful application of technology and a lasting model for regional modernization.

For Aalto, the TVA showed that development could be economic, territorial, and social at once. Electrification required more than dams and power for factories—it demanded stable communities, mobility networks, and labor. TVAs standardized, growable, demountable housing systems paralleled Aalto’s flexible standardization of the Growing House.

Aalto absorbed the TVA as a model for shaping the American Town in Finland, but the research that led to his MIT appointment began earlier. In 1934, through a housing “laboratory” in Varkaus, he developed the *AA Housing* for Ahlström—a system in which workers invested in their own homes, built on company-leased land and fabricated from standardized components produced in a nearby factory. (Fig. 3) Many of these houses were realized but the project was dismantled in 1939 amid the uncertainty of War. This disruption hastened Aalto’s move to America, where he sought to safeguard both his career and Finland’s future.

The New Deal’s industrial planning treated infrastructure, energy, and production as tools of national recovery, but it also revealed a truth Aalto would confront in Lapland: industrial development fails when it does not rebuild the social conditions. In postwar Finland, Aalto likewise framed reconstruction as a civic systems problem—worker rehousing, settlement structure, public services, and regional logistics had to be designed together.

The regional plan for Lapland included green networks across transportation, culture, and economic activity, promoting new energy sources to improve efficiency. The plan was overtly territorial: “If all 30 planned dams in Lapland had been constructed, the region’s system capacity could have doubled, resulting in an output density surpassing even the TVA.”⁴ But the plan was not only about energy; it also relied on a systematic distribution of growing towns and adaptable building types. (Fig. 4)

A 1951 Aalto Atelier document outlined the structure of regional planning as an expanding sequence: room → apartment → building → plot → block → city → area → territory. This method ensured that every scale—from building design to regional zoning—accounted for dwelling, administration, transportation, employment, cultural life, recreation, and nature.⁵

Rather than allowing municipalities to develop isolated industrial zones or create uneven development, shared industrial areas were positioned along municipal borders, benefiting multiple communities as if under a single jurisdiction. This gave the state and investors a clear basis for evaluating transport capacity, expansion potential, and ground suitability, thereby accelerating decisions about industry and construction. Aalto argued that Lapland's recovery should follow a network of settlement "cells," coordinated by a strong planning institution, with municipalities executing local work under broader reconstruction oversight.

Incremental and "half-house" models in the 1950s were an alternative narrative, but they often remained detached from a broader framework of regional planning. The cross-municipal collaboration Aalto envisioned suggested how decentralization could produce a new form of centralization—one in which density is more equitably shared, reducing reliance on fixed green-belt negotiations.

The United States now faces a similar existential challenge: rapid industrial scaling—clean energy, domestic manufacturing, and resilient supply chains—paired with worker housing and community infrastructure. The Green New Deal has sought to reinterpret the New Deal to meet these demands while also correcting the spatial legacies of segregation and isolation in pursuit of a more equitable democracy.

Pilot programs such as New York's "Green CHIPS" gesture toward the constructive ambitions implicit in both the New Deal and Aalto's planning in Lapland. By linking industrial policy to enforceable community obligations, such initiatives aim to ensure that development produces stability, settlement, and shared benefit, rather than extraction and displacement.

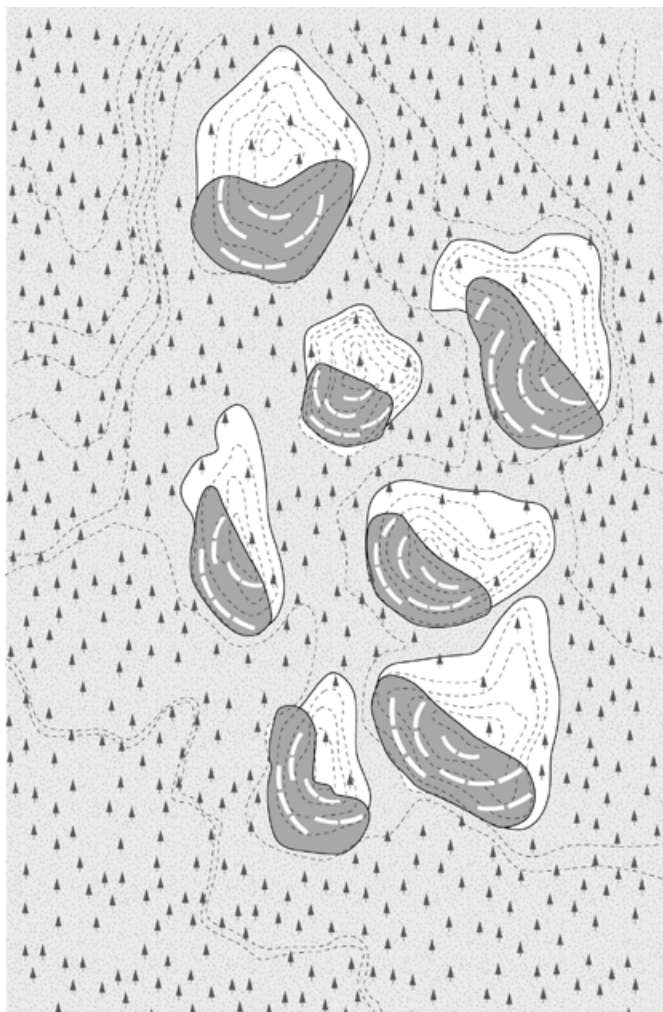
In 1939, Aalto wrote of "The Human Side"—a magazine project that never materialized—arguing that a new system of values must emerge from a synthesis of "culture, social life, industry, and politics."⁶ What matters is not the production of a town that simply resembles Finnishness, nor the atmospheric evocation of Finland through architectural symbols. What matters is democracy in deeper spatial terms: density supported by open green space, equitable distribution, and a civic armature capable of serving as a model for world development. (Fig. 5)

This is what the Finnish Town in America signifies.

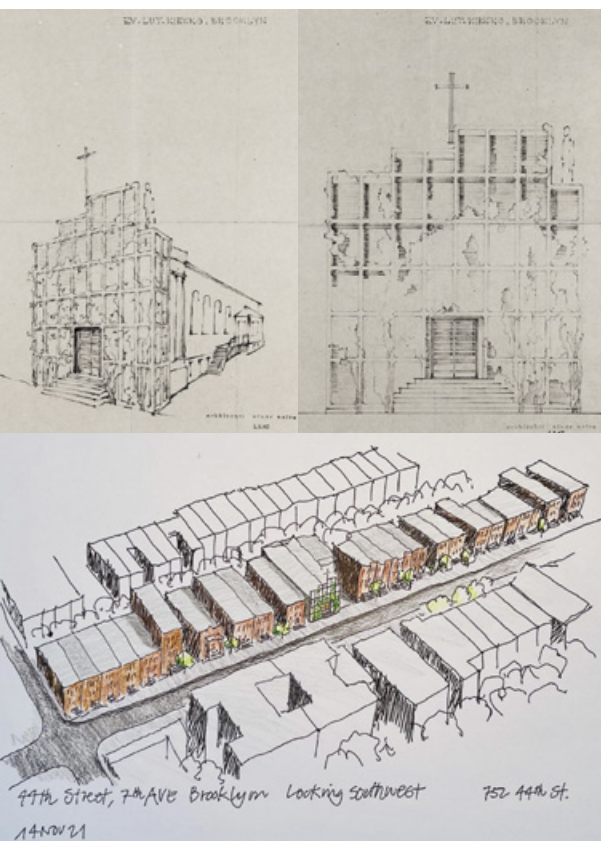
Endnotes

1. Pekka Korvenmaa, "Alvar Aalto and Finnish Industry", in *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, ed. Peter Reed (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 90.
2. The Finlandia Foundation, NY Chapter, "*Finntown Map*": <https://www.finlandiafoundationny.org/finntown> (accessed 26.01.2026)
3. Robert Cody and Angela Amoia. *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design* (London: Routledge, 2025), 227.
4. Cody and Amoia, *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design*, 98.
5. Unpublished document in Folder - Lapin Yleiskaava, "*Tarkitottavelin*," 1951. Alvar Aalto Foundation.
6. Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), 114.

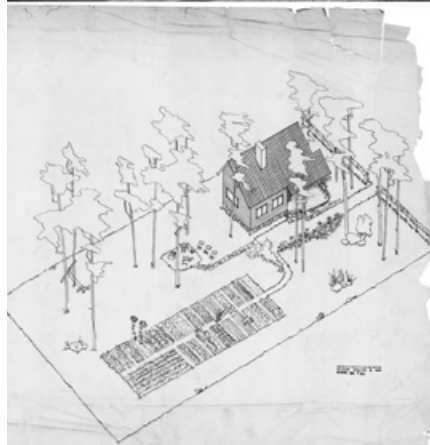
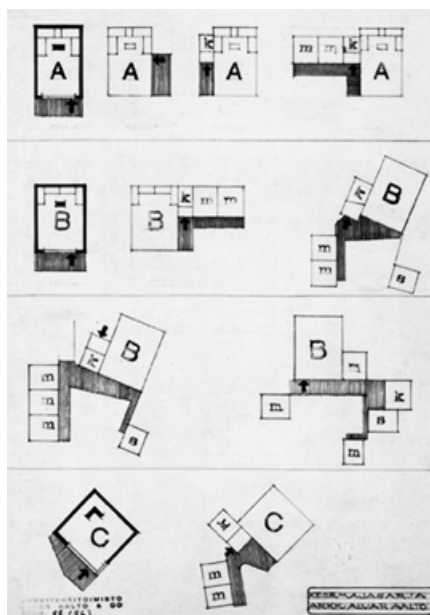
Figures



1. American Town in Finland – Half Earth – Neighborhoods.
Redrawn after Alvar Aalto Foundation 10-4.



2. Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brooklyn.
Used by Permission
© Kirk Gastinger.



3. AA-järjestelmä, the AA-System Housing.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation, 88-863 & 88-80,
Photo © Angela Amoia.

Map of the Tennessee Valley Authority



Regional Plan of the Tennessee Valley Watershed
(Redrawn from Source: NAID: 214442138, September 1, 1952)

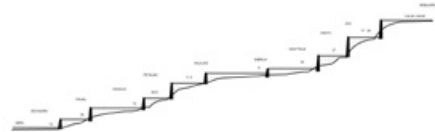


Section Profile of the Tennessee Valley Watershed
(Redrawn from Source: NAID: 214442138, September 1, 1952)

Map of the Lapland Region Plan

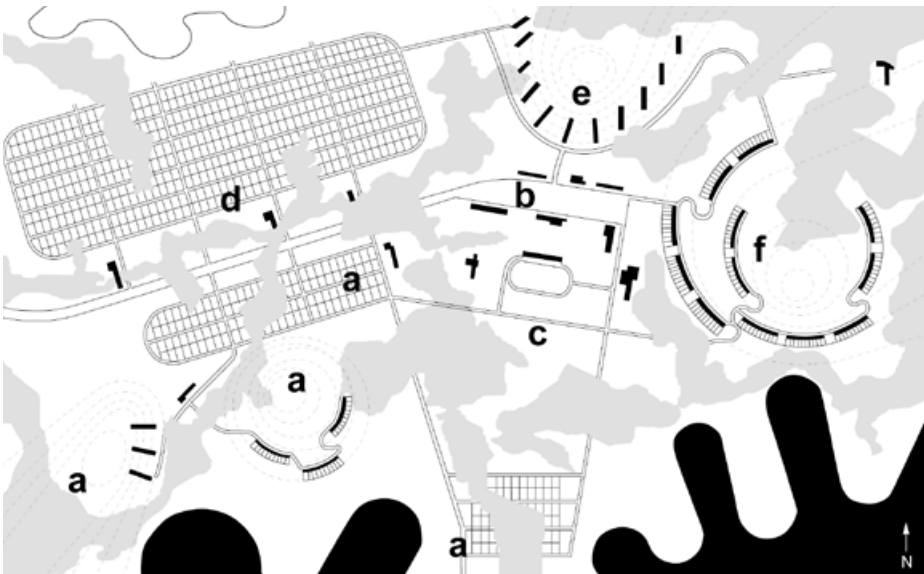


Regional Plan of the Kemijoki Valley Watershed
(Source: AAF: 12-202, Undated)



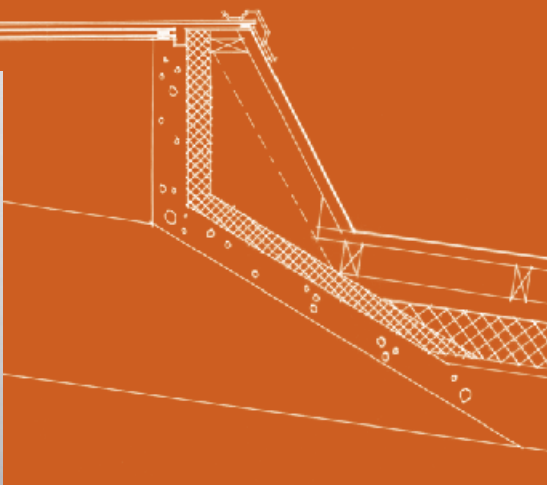
Section Profile of the Kemijoki Valley Watershed
(Source: AAF: 12-202, Undated)

4. TVA and Lapland, Comparative Illustration.
© Amoia Cody Architecture



5. An American Town in Finland or a Finnish Town in America.
Redrawn after Alvar Aalto Experimental Town Plan, 1940.

C o n c e p t s



Nina Bačun

Nina Bačun is a designer, researcher, and educator exploring the domains of exhibition and set design, conceptual and speculative design, and film. Her collaborations with the Zagreb-based design collective Oaza reflect a holistic and multidisciplinary approach. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in the Architecture and Urban Planning program at the University of Zagreb, where her research focuses on the intersection of architecture and moving images. *Oaza is an all-female collective that has been actively engaged in art and design research initiatives within the autonomous cultural sector since 2013. For more information, visit: www.oazabooks.com and www.o-a-z-a.com

ARCHITECTURE BEYOND OBJECTHOOD: THE PAIMIO SANATORIUM AS A CINEMATIC ENVIRONMENT

Nina Bačun

From Cure to Experience

Modernist architecture has traditionally been interpreted through the lenses of function, form, and technological progress. Yet, as Beatriz Colomina suggests, modern buildings were also conceived as *healthy bodies* in themselves.¹ (Fig. 1) Paimio Sanatorium, designed for tuberculosis patients,² exemplifies this medicalized paradigm and is commonly described as a synthesis of functionalism and humanistic design, organized around the care of the ill body as its central principle.³ A complementary perspective to this reading is the building's capacity to operate as a perceptual and temporal medium.

This paper proposes an additional interpretation: Paimio as a *cinematic environment*. Here, architecture is understood not as a static object but as a *time-based spatial system* that organizes experience through movement, sequence, and atmospheric variation. The analysis aligns with broader theoretical shifts that consider architecture in relation to media, affect, and environmental perception,⁴ and resonates with contemporary concerns about *fluid spatial conditions*, or what might be described as *liquid spatiality*.⁵

In this framework, the sanatorium becomes a device that structures how patients see, breathe, move, and inhabit time. Healing is not only medical but environmental, produced through the careful orchestration of sensory experience.⁶

Spatial Sequencing and Architectural Montage

The overall composition of the complex reveals a logic comparable to *cinematic montage* (Table 1). Separate volumes—patient wards, service wings, circulation cores, and terraces—are arranged as discrete spatial units connected through controlled transitions.

Arrival marks a perceptual shift from urban infrastructure to the surrounding pine forest (Fig. 2). The building emerges gradually from the landscape, establishing a transition from the external world to the therapeutic architectural environment. Internal circulation continues this narrative logic. Long corridors guide forward movement, functioning as linear trajectories similar to tracking shots. Compression within en-

closed passages alternates with moments of spatial release, such as stair landings, glazed corners, or access to balconies (Fig. 3).

Each spatial condition can be understood as a *scene*, while movement through the building produces the editing structure. Light intensifies or softens, views open or close, and the body alternates between motion and rest. This sequencing generates a therapeutic rhythm: interior/exterior, shadow/light, enclosure/exposure.

Such spatial montage does not merely organise function; it modulates attention and emotional state, suggesting architecture as a narrative environment rather than a neutral container.

The patient room as viewing apparatus

The patient room represents the most precise articulation of *architecture as a perceptual device*. Because tuberculosis treatment required long periods of rest, Alto designed the space from the perspective of a reclining body.

The window is positioned to frame the forest horizon, providing a stable visual field for bedridden patients. The ceiling is painted in a darker tone to reduce glare within the patient's field of vision, which, from the reclining position, becomes the primary visual surface – a new kind of interior *façade*. Lighting fixtures are carefully placed outside direct sightlines to avoid visual disturbance. Furniture also participates in this perceptual system. The well-known laminated plywood Paimio lounge chair (Fig. 4) is angled to facilitate breathing and relaxation, reinforcing the spatial orientation of the body toward the framed landscape.⁷

In this configuration, the patient occupies a fixed viewing position, while the environment provides a slow-moving visual field shaped by weather, daylight, and seasonal change. The room thus functions as a form of *durational spectatorship*, where time is experienced through subtle environmental transformation rather than discrete events.

Light, air, and atmospheric temporality

Modernist sanatorium design emphasised sunlight and fresh air as therapeutic agents. In Paimio, one could argue that these elements are not simply functional requirements but *temporal media*.

Extended balconies and roof terraces allow patients to experience the movement of the sun across the day (Fig.5). The horizontal massing of the ward block em-

phasizes solar exposure, while adjustable shading and orientation control glare and overheating. Seasonal variation—long summer days, low winter light—becomes part of the therapeutic cycle.

Atmospheric conditions such as shadow patterns, reflected light, humidity, and temperature variation produce a continuously changing environment. Rather than presenting a fixed architectural image, the building generates a *dynamic field of perception*. One might describe this as a form of *meteorological cinema*, in which natural processes produce a sequence of visual and sensory events.

Through repetition and duration, these environmental images accumulate as *embodied memory*, suggesting architecture as a medium for long-term affective conditioning.

Choreography and bodily affordance

Beyond visual perception, Paimio carefully *scripts bodily movement and posture*. Circulation routes are dimensioned to encourage slow walking, while handrails, textures, and color contrasts support orientation and tactile engagement.

Staircases illuminated from above create vertical transitions marked by changing light intensity. Corridors maintain consistent proportions that regulate pace and reduce disorientation. Outdoor terraces provide spaces for reclining or sitting in prescribed arrangements aligned with sun exposure.

These design strategies can be understood through the concept of *affordance*⁸: spatial conditions that suggest or support specific bodily actions. The building encourages rest, controlled movement, deep breathing, and prolonged exposure to environmental stimuli.

In this sense, *architecture operates as a form of spatial choreography*, guiding the body through sequences comparable to scenographic staging. Healing emerges through the alignment of bodily rhythm with environmental rhythm.

Landscape as extended image field

The surrounding forest is integral to the spatial experience. The ward block is oriented to maximize visual contact with trees, and terraces function as viewing platforms that extend interior space outward.

The horizon line of the forest stabilizes perception and provides a consistent visual reference, reducing anxiety and sensory overload. Seasonal transformation—color change, snow cover, shifting density—ensures that the visual field remains dynamic without becoming overwhelming.

The *landscape thus functions as a continuous image surface*, reinforcing the building's role as a *framing device*. Rather than isolating patients from their environment, Paimio constructs a mediated relationship in which nature is carefully edited and presented.

This integration anticipates contemporary discussions on ecological perception and the role of architecture in shaping environmental awareness.

Architecture as analog media environment

From a media-theoretical perspective, the sanatorium can be interpreted as an *analog environmental interface*. It regulates sensory input (light, sound, air), structures visual framing, and organizes temporal exposure.

Unlike digital immersive environments, this system operates through material means: orientation, proportion, color, texture, and atmospheric control. Yet the underlying logic is similar – the design of a total environment intended to influence perception, mood, and behavior.

Such a reading situates Paimio within a broader genealogy of immersive spatial practices, from exhibition design and scenography to contemporary media architecture. The building demonstrates that environmental immersion predates electronic media and can be achieved through architectural orchestration alone.

Liquid spatiality and the counter-archive

The experience of Paimio is defined less by stable form than by *continuous change*. Light shifts hourly, weather alters visibility, seasons transform the landscape, and the body moves between states of rest and exposure. *Space* is therefore experienced as a *process* rather than an object.

This fluid condition aligns with the concept of *liquid spatiality*, where boundaries between architecture, environment, and atmosphere remain permeable. The building does not present a fixed image but produces a field of ongoing transformation.

Within this framework, Paimio can be understood as a *counter-archive*. Memory is not stored in discrete representations but emerges through repetition, duration, and sensory accumulation. Patients internalize rhythms of light, air, and landscape, forming embodied recollections that persist beyond the immediate therapeutic context.

Conclusion

Reconsidered through the lens of *cinematic spatiality*, the Paimio Sanatorium reveals architecture's capacity to function as a time-based medium. Through sequencing, framing, atmospheric modulation, and bodily choreography, the building constructs a *therapeutic narrative* in which perception and healing are inseparable.

This interpretation shifts the emphasis from functionalist efficiency to experiential orchestration. Paimio anticipates contemporary concerns with immersive environments, environmental media, and the fluid relationship between architecture and image.

More broadly, the case suggests that *cinematic space* does not depend on projection technologies. It can emerge from the careful alignment of movement, atmosphere, and duration within the built environment. In this sense, Paimio stands as a precursor to contemporary explorations of architecture as a medium of perception, memory, and environmental experience—a spatial cinema in which the image is not projected but lived.

Endnotes

- 1 Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 10–11, 63. Colomina argues that tuberculosis—and the imaging technology associated with it, particularly X-rays—played a decisive role in shaping modern architecture by transforming the conception of space and redefining the relationship between inside and outside. She also observes that, in canonical photographs, the stepped terraces of the Paimio Sanatorium resemble “ribs in an X-ray,” referencing the primary diagnostic image associated with the disease.
- 2 Colomina notes that the tuberculosis crisis—responsible for extremely high mortality rates in major European cities—mobilized architects, engineers, and physicians to rethink the relationship between hygiene, sunlight, air, and architectural form. She links modern architecture's emphasis on whiteness, glass, and the interpenetration of interior and exterior to these medical concerns and highlights Alvar Aalto's claim that the Paimio Sanatorium should be designed from the perspective of the weakest body. Beatriz Colomina, “Architecture and Illness,” interview by Vitra Magazine, Vitra Magazine, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.vitra.com/fr-me/magazine/details/architecture-and-illness> (accessed January 25, 2026)
- 3 The bodily and psychological sensitivity of the patient served to recalibrate architectural design. Elements developed for therapeutic purposes were subsequently normalized within everyday environments. The laminated birch Paimio chair, originally designed to support breathing by opening the patient's chest, soon became a widely adopted piece of modern furniture. Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 70.
- 4 For discussions of architecture in relation to media, affect, and environmental perception, see Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002); Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA:

- MIT Press, 1994); Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019); and Yon Yoder, "Architecture After Affect," in *Architecture, Film, and the In-Between: Spatio-Cinematic Betwixt*, ed. Vahid Vahdat and James F. Kerestes (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2023), 24–47.
- 5 Zygmunt Bauman introduces the concept of "liquid modernity" to describe the contemporary condition as a phase of continuous flux, instability, and transformation rather than a break from modernity itself. He contrasts the earlier "solid" phase—characterized by order, permanence, and the pursuit of a final, stable form—with a "liquid" phase defined by mobility, uncertainty, and ongoing reconfiguration. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). For an application of this concept to cinematic spatiality and environmental perception, see Nina Bačun, "Liquid Cinematic Spaces," in *Reporting the Delta: An Exploration of Climate, Space, and Society Through Archival Documentaries*, ed. Luca Iuorio, Sophia Arbara, and Carissa Champlin (Delft: TU Delft OPEN Publishing and nai010 publishers, 2023), 192–209.
 - 6 The concept of healing as a temporary interruption or suspension of everyday life—positioned between states of order and disorder and understood as a liminal socio-somatic condition—is discussed in David Bergé, *Architectures of Healing: Cure through Sleep, Touch, and Travel* (Athens: Kyklada Press, 2021).
 - 7 After the Paimio Sanatorium, Aalto's work acquired what Colomina describes as an aura of health, with the building functioning as a laboratory for modern architecture—a site for testing spatial, material, and environmental strategies. In 1935, Alvar and Aino Aalto founded Artek to promote human physical and psychological well-being, significantly tracing the company's origins to the experiments developed at Paimio. The bodily sensitivity of the patient recalibrated architectural thinking, allowing therapeutic solutions to migrate into everyday life; the laminated birch Paimio chair, designed to facilitate breathing, soon became a widely adopted object of modern domestic culture. Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 70.
 - 8 American psychologist James J. Gibson introduced the concept of *affordances* within his ecological theory of perception, arguing that perception is a direct and holistic process through which individuals detect actionable possibilities in the environment. Rather than passively receiving sensory information in terms of object shapes and spatial relationships, perception actively links environmental properties to possibilities for action. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014). For further theoretical perspectives on design, agency, and the interpretation of affordances, see Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," keynote lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society, Falmouth, Cornwall, September 3, 2008.; <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/112-DESIGN-CORNWALL-GB.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2025); and Arto Lanamäki, Devendra Thapa, and Karen Stendal, "What Does a Chair Afford? A Heideggerian Perspective of Affordances," *Selected Papers of the IRIS 6* (2015): <https://aisel.aisnet.org/iris2015/2> (accessed January 25, 2025).

Figures

1. Exterior view with sundeck balconies,
Paimio Sanatorium, ca. 1933.
Gustaf Welin, 1933. © Alvar Aalto
Foundation



2. Aerial view of Paimio Sanatorium.
Alvar Aalto, 1930s. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



3. Main staircase, Paimio Sanatorium.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation.



4. Author's collage combining photographs by Gustav Welin and Maija Holma.
Source images © Alvar Aalto Foundation.

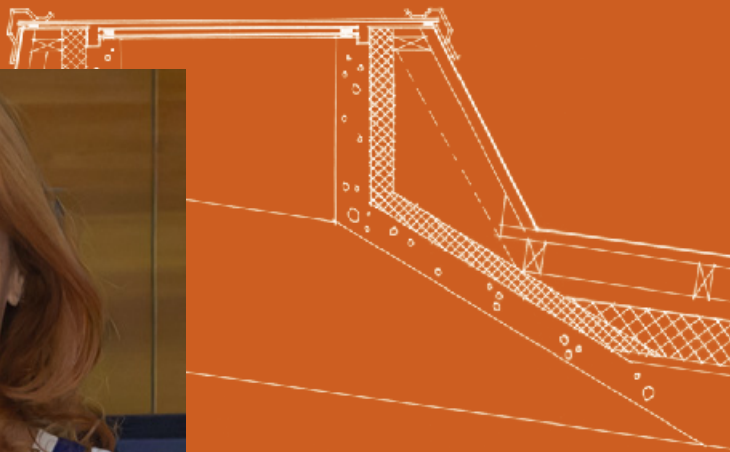
5. Author's collage combining photographs of the roof terrace (1933–1934) by Gustav Welin. Source images © Alvar Aalto Foundation.



Key Cinematic Operator	Architectural Element (Paimio)	Spatial Mechanism	Experiential / Conceptual Effect	Therapeutic / Conceptual Role
Framing	Patient room windows, terrace orientations	Controlled views toward forest and horizon	Stabilizes perception; landscape becomes a continuous therapeutic image	Landscape as a continuous healing image
Montage / sequencing	Circulation paths, transitions between volumes	Ordered progression through corridors, stairs, and thresholds	Produces a narrative spatial experience; architecture unfolds in time	Environmental rhythm supporting psychological comfort
Duration	Extended rest facing landscape; slow environmental change	Minimal spatial variation with continuous light, weather, and seasonal shifts	Time is experienced atmospherically; supports calm, recovery, and temporal immersion	Healing through temporal immersion and calm continuity
Lighting design	Orientation, balconies, roof terraces, indirect light	Modulation of natural and artificial light	Circadian regulation, reduced glare, atmospheric variation	Light as therapeutic medium
Zoning / visibility / Point of View (Embodied Perspective)	Design from the reclining patient position	Spatial calibration to the weakest body (ceiling color, lighting, furniture, ventilation)	Ethical and perceptual shift toward vulnerability; architecture organized around bodily condition	Architecture calibrated to the vulnerable body
Atmospheric Modulation	Light, air, sound control, climatic exposure	Integration of environmental variables into spatial design	Creates an immersive sensory field; architecture operates as a therapeutic environment	Architecture as meteorological cinema
Choreography	Prescribed walking routes, resting zones, sun exposure areas	Spatial scripting of bodily behavior	Alignment of body rhythm with environmental rhythm	Healing through movement and rest patterns
Immersion	Total environmental control (light, air, sound, view)	Integration of sensory conditions into unified field	Full-body environmental experience	Architecture as analog immersive media
Cut / Threshold	Doors, stair landings, glazed corners, terrace access	Moments of spatial transition	Perceptual reset; shifts in scale and atmosphere	Structuring attention and emotional rhythm

Table 1. Key cinematic operators translating film logic into architectural strategies at Paimio Sanatorium, demonstrating how perception, time, body, and atmosphere are orchestrated as a therapeutic environmental system.

C o n c e p t s



Petra Čeferin

Petra Čeferin is an architect, professor and research fellow at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana, where she teaches architectural theory and history. She received her professional degree in architecture from both the University of Ljubljana and Helsinki University of Technology. In 2003 she received her doctorate in architecture from University of Ljubljana on the international promotion of Finnish architecture. In 2015 she received her second PhD in philosophy of architecture with the title *Architecture as Creative Practice*. Petra Čeferin has lectured and written extensively on modern and contemporary architecture in connection with contemporary philosophy. Her publications include *Constructing a Legend: The International Exhibitions of Finnish Architecture 1957-1967* (SKS Publishing, 2003), *Transforming Reality with Architecture: Finnish Case* (Fondazione Bruno Zevi, 2008) and *The Resistant Object of Architecture. A Lacanian Perspective* (Routledge, 2021). She is also the co-founder and editor of the book series *Theoretical Practice of Architecture*, and the recipient of *The Annual Bruno Zevi Award*.

TOO MUCH IS JUST RIGHT: CONSTRUCTING MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Petra Čeferin

Less is More, Less is a Bore, and Moore is More.¹

To which I would add one more: Too Much is Just Right. For this formulation tells us something crucial about architecture.

Firstly, it signifies a certain approach to and understanding of design, one characterised by doing too much (in terms of detailing, materials, elements) in order – hopefully, as there is always an element of risk involved – to turn this ‘too much’ into ‘just right.’ Just right in the sense that, as a result of this procedure, an architectural object is produced – and not simply a (decorated) utilitarian object. An excellent example of such an approach to design is Villa Mairea, designed by Aino and Alvar Aalto in the late 1930s. Secondly, the formulation ‘too much is just right’ not only signifies a specific method or approach to design but also encapsulates the very logical structure of an architectural object as such – every architectural object.

Turning Too Much into Just Right

Let us begin with the first point: ‘too much is just right’ as a particular approach to design and the Villa Mairea as an exemplary case of this approach.

Villa Mairea has often been described as a unique work of art, or as an entirely personal expression devoid of any unifying rational principles, even as “entirely illogical.” In fact, Aalto’s post-functionalist phase in general has often been characterised in just such terms. But other interpretations have well demonstrated that Aalto consistently used rational organising principles in his work, and that this villa too is based on such principles.² Its floor plan has a regular L-shape; it follows a modular and structural grid; the program of the house is arranged as a series of functional zones (Fig. 1). To this, however, these interpretations add that the rules and guiding principles of rationalism are also consistently violated in the villa, and it seems as if the architects “aimed at confusing any reading of regularity and repetition”³ or as if they insisted on subverting rationalist principles.⁴

It is here, in my view, that another step has to be introduced: this duality of the villa should be read together, as part of the same system.⁵ For it is precisely the two approaches together – the use of rationalist principles AND their simultaneous

transgression – that constitute the Aaltos's architectural system developed in Villa Mairea.

This claim is supported by the fact that at the time the design of the villa began, Aalto outlined a certain orientation for modern architecture that should be followed, which he called *extended rationalism*.⁶ Aalto's thesis posited that the established approach to design, based on technological efficiency, economy of means, and instrumental functionalism, which he referred to as *rationalism*, had to be extended. It has to be *extended* such that it also takes into account that which is unquantifiable, is invisible to the eye yet deeply affects us as human beings. It has to be extended with the 'human factor'. Only if it is extended with this factor that is, strictly speaking, *external* to the rational system, would it become *real rationalism*.⁷

And this is in my view – as analysis of the villa indicates – precisely what the Aaltos tried to develop in this villa. Which means, more concretely, that in this villa various techniques of confusing, subverting, and transgressing rationalist principles (which are external/other to the rational system) are employed precisely as a constitutive part of these principles. Rationalist principles are used such that in the name of this same rationality they are also violated – in order to make out of the rational system the human or architectural rationalism.

Let us examine this line of thought through a few select segments of the villa, beginning with the load-bearing structure and the associated organisation of the living space (Fig. 2). As mentioned, the columns are arranged on a grid. But each column is treated differently: some are wrapped in rattan or clad in wood; in certain locations, two or three columns replace a single one; some are made of steel, while others are constructed of concrete. From the structural point of view, these varied treatments are entirely unnecessary. Yet they are not simply decorations added to the columns, either. Through these intervening treatments the columns themselves are transformed. They are no longer simply load-bearing elements but simultaneously emerge as unique objects that in their enhanced material presence engage our sensory perception. Nor is this all they do. They also trigger other effects, such as the impression of continuity between the interior and exterior of the house, as well as the sense of spatial complexity within the living area. This complexity is further enhanced by the careful arrangement of various openings and the slanting partition walls, and by the exceptional richness of detailing, materials, motifs, and textures. One could indeed argue that here everything is excessively designed, that there is too much of everything. Yet it is precisely as a result of this excess that the functionality of the villa's elements and spatial segments changes. Like the columns, other parts of the building such as walls, staircases, openings, even door handles are not

simply elements that serve their intended purposes of dividing, protecting, connecting, and opening. Rather, they are characterised by what Jacques Rancière says of works of art: they are always also doing something else than their proper business.⁸ They have an extended functionality, which is extended *from within* as the result of their *architectural* articulation.

From the standpoint of instrumental rationalism, all these various gestures – cladding the columns, shifting the partition walls, and attention to ‘unnecessary’ details – are redundant and superfluous. Yet, for the architecture of the villa, they are crucial. Were they to be removed, not only would the aesthetic dimension of individual objects and the constituted space be lost; but the complexity of functions these objects perform too would disappear. In short, one would lose the architecture itself.

Earlier, we considered the idea that there is somehow ‘too much’ of everything in Villa Mairea. Now we can add that here, in this villa, there is too much in the way that this ‘too much’ is turned into ‘just right.’ Just right in the sense that this villa functions as architecture that is rationally organised to just the right extent, as an example of appropriate rationalism, or architectural rationalism. With this villa, the architects opened the way into a logic of rationality distinct from instrumental rationality. Such a notion can be summarized by the formulation *too much is just right*. According to this logic, what is considered ‘too much’ can be precisely that which is essential for architecture, that which is for architecture ‘just right.’

Too Much as Just Right

But what in fact constitutes ‘just right’ in architecture? Which lead us to my second point: in architecture, ‘just right’ is always a kind of ‘too much’. More precisely, the formula ‘too much is just right’ encapsulates the very logical structure of every successful architectural construction, every architectural object.

Let us examine this more closely. As an example, we can take one of the columns of Villa Mairea (Fig. 2). It can be described as two things at once. It is a load-bearing structural element; but it is not only that, it is also an aesthetic object of architecture. What is essential is the following: both dimensions of the column appear simultaneously. They cannot be separated. And this is not characteristic for this column alone, but for every architectural object. A well-articulated architectural object is characterised by the *inseparability* of the utilitarian/functional and the aesthetic. Their separation would not simply isolate one or the other component of the architectural object, but would destroy the architectural object as such, and with it both of its components.

An architectural object could therefore be defined as follows: it is *something less* than what it clearly is; and it is an aesthetic object bordering on art. At the same time, it is also an object that is *something more* than what it unarguably is, and it is an ordinary functional object. If we combine these observations into a single formulation, we can say that an architectural object is that object which is always also *something other or else than what it is*. It is two at the same time. But this two is neither the sum of the two – a utilitarian object and an aesthetic object – nor is it their amalgamation into one. Instead, it is the kind of two that articulates also *something else*, something that is *neither one nor the other* of both objects that constitute the two. But this ‘something else’, this ‘third’, which is neither one nor the other, is not actually some third object. Moreover, it is not an object in the ordinary sense of the word. It is an object of a special kind – an object as the *materialisation of the difference* between a utilitarian and an aesthetic object.

It is from this difference that the architectural object is made. It is an object with an internal difference. We cannot see this difference as such; we just see an object before us, such as the column of Villa Mairea. ‘Objectively’ speaking this difference is nothing. And yet it isn’t simply null, for it has effects. It works in the way that the column appears, or that we can see it, as an architectural object. This ‘almost null’ difference is therefore crucial for architecture. It constitutes that ‘too much’ (according to the world of given objectivity) that constitutes a particular object as ‘just right,’ as an architectural object, the appearance of architecture in the world.

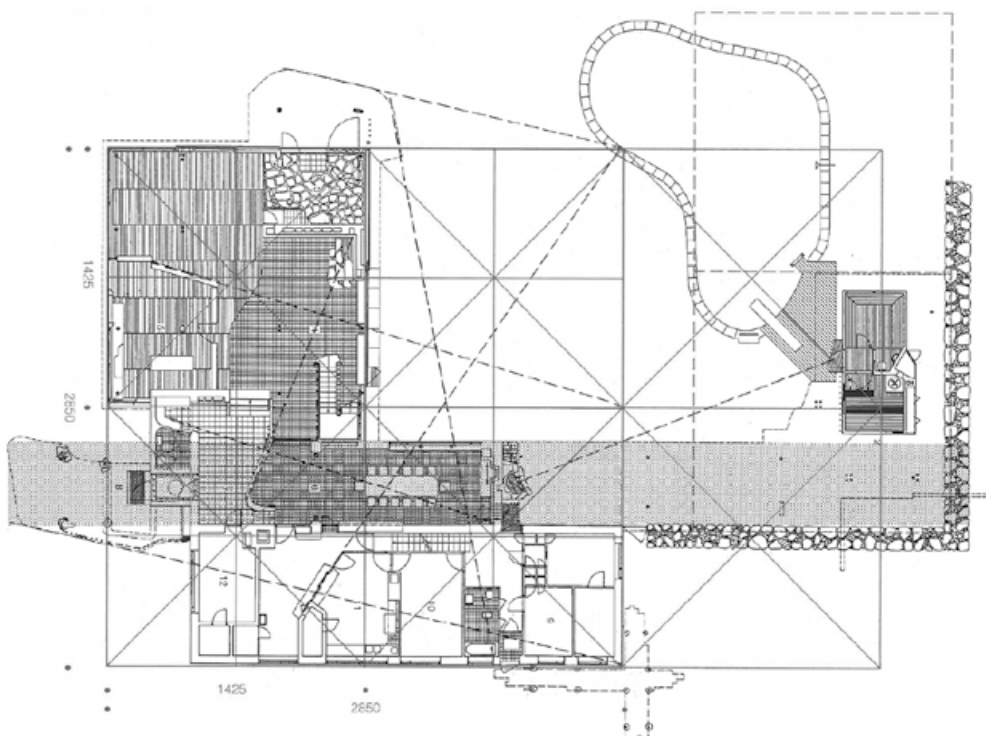
And because of this special structure, because it is always ‘something other’ than what it is (without actually being something other), the architectural object works in a special way. It requires something from us. It compels us to ask ourselves, what do we see when we see this? Which is not simply an invitation to look and think about the object before us. It is an invitation to engage in looking and thinking in a specific way – in the way whose sole purpose is to exercise our autonomous faculties, capacities inherent to everyone. This means activating what Aalto refers to as the ‘human factor’. And only once we activate this factor do we actually enter architecture, and only then does architecture itself appear – appears as a rational system extended from within.

Endnotes

- 1 Here I am referring to the famous architectural “formulas” that have been quoted and reformulated repeatedly – the first is attributed to Mies van der Rohe, followed by Robert Venturi’s well-known response, and another one attributed to Charles Moore. This series was followed by other (re) formulations: for instance, architect Juha Hlonen used it in the title of the Alvar Aalto Symposium that he curated: *Less and More: Extending the Rational in Architecture*. 10th International Alvar Aalto Symposium, 2006.

- 2 Cf. Andres Duany, "Principles in the Architecture of Alvar Aalto," *Harvard Architectural Review* 5 (1986), 105-119; Juhani Pallasmaa, "Image and Meaning", in *Villa Mairea 1938–39*, ed. Juhani Pallasmaa (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation and Mairea Foundation, 1998), 70-125.
- 3 Pallasmaa, "Image and Meaning", 80.
- 4 Kari Jormakka, Jacqueline Gargus, Douglas Graf, *The Use and Abuse of Paper: Essays on Alvar Aalto* (Tampere: Tampere University of Technology, 1999), 34.
- 5 This villa has been described as an extremely complex work and the result of a synthetic approach. See, for instance: Akos Moravanszky, "In the Alchemist's Laboratory: Aalto and the Materials of Architecture," in *Alvar Aalto Second Nature*, eds. Mateo Kries, Jochen Eisenbrand (Vitra Design Museum, 2015). While I agree with this, I also argue that there is a distinct method behind it.
- 6 Aalto presented his concept of extended rationalism in a lecture in Stockholm in 1935. Cf. Alvar Aalto, "Rationalism and Man", in *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, ed. Goran Schildt (Helsinki: Otava Publishing, 1997), 89-93.
- 7 See Alvar Aalto, "Rationalism and Man", 92.
- 8 "Politics Equals Aesthetics: A Conversation between Jacques Rancière and Mark Foster Gage," in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2019), 17
- 9 For a detailed elaboration of the architectural object as an object of a special kind see Petra Čeferin, *The Resistant Object of Architecture. A Lacanian Perspective* (London and New York, Routledge, 2021), 104-119.

Figures

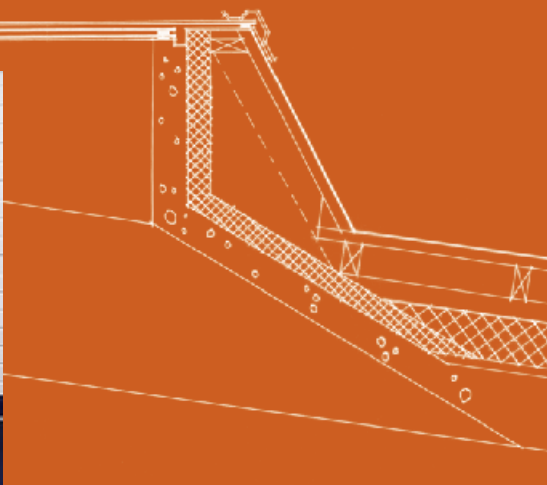


1. Ground-floor plan and modular coordination of the Villa Mairea.
Drawing by Juhani Pallasmaa. © Juhani Pallasmaa



2. Villa Mairea, interior
© Architecture and Design Museum Helsinki

C o n c e p t s



Robert Cody

Robert Cody is a registered architect, LEED-accredited, and a member of the AIA and NCARB. He is a partner at Amoia Cody Architecture in Brooklyn, NY. Since 2005, he has taught at the New York Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Design, where he has served as Associate Professor of Practice since 2019 and is currently Director of the Master of Architecture program. His teaching includes comprehensive and community design studios, building technology, and architectural theory, and he has led study-abroad programs in Italy, Germany, and Scandinavia. His academic leadership roles include Department Chair (2011–2017) and Interim Associate Dean (2017–18). With over 30 years of professional experience, Cody has worked on a wide range of projects, including housing, office buildings, towers, healthcare and educational facilities, community projects, and the renovation of the Museum of Modern Art's garden façades. His practice emphasizes clear project parameters and continuity from concept through construction, enabling a seamless transition from drawings to on-site execution. Cody and his partner, Angela Amoia, co-authored the *NYC Green Density Zoning Handbook* (2018), *Alvar Aalto and the Future of Architecture* (2022), and *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design* (2025), reflecting their integrated approach to design, sustainability, and technology.

REINTERPRETING AALTO'S URBANISM

Robert Cody

According to a recent United Nations report, by 2050 nearly two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities or urban regions, underscoring the urgent need for more sustainable approaches to planning and infrastructure.¹ Yet this growth is not concentrated solely in dense megacities: more than 60 percent of new urbanization is occurring in low-density suburban and peri-urban areas,² placing increasing strain on ecosystems, infrastructure, and social systems.

As urban regions expand outward, they often sever their relationship with landscape and natural processes, intensifying many of the environmental and social crises cities now face.³ Planning today, therefore, demands new patterns that strengthen physical and ecological infrastructure while intentionally shaping social networks, reestablishing meaningful connections between people, place, and systems.

This review of Alvar Aalto's urbanism reveals patterns shaped not only by architectural form, but by landscape and the forces of regional planning. Aalto was explicit in rejecting uncontrolled outward expansion, arguing that *"it is hardly advantageous, attractive, or right to have housing areas spreading out from the center like ripples on water until they cover everything. Instead ... good forests should remain good forests, and the same goes for good farmland. The housing should be placed in the areas between."*⁴

Rejecting modernist ideology and utopian systems, Aalto grounded his work in the *in-between*, where flexibility across local and regional conditions of climate, topography, material, and social structure forms a situatedness defined by continuity, variability, and empathy. His plans integrated ecological structures, compact densities, and adaptable infrastructures, while allowing informality and long-term change. Often suburban in character, they offer enduring lessons for managing sprawl, mobility, energy, labor, housing, and industry as an interwoven *Rural-Urban Continuum*.⁵

For Aalto, urban and architectural patterns functioned as adaptive systems shaped by use, context, and memory, situated within the commons—the critical zone where nature and collective settlement intersect. Working frequently through metaphor, Aalto drew from natural cellular systems, reading the city as an organism in which buildings and districts operate as "living cells" within an infrastructural landscape. (Fig. 1)

Scientific discoveries support these metaphors. The *interstitium*—the space between organs—has only recently been understood as a vast functional system that stores resources and facilitates exchange.⁶ Likewise, a forest’s mycorrhizal network reveals a complex underground web through which trees communicate, share nutrients, and sustain collective life.⁷

The forest is a dynamic field shaped by growth, adaptation, and decay. Forests managed solely for efficiency and extraction are less resilient than natural forests, and urbanism faces the same fate. Without adaptability and exchange, diversity collapses, and infrastructure becomes fragile and overburdened.

Humans, like freestanding buildings, are unitary organisms, while trees function as modular, collective systems, each branch operating autonomously while sustaining the whole.⁸ This condition—simultaneously free and connected—offers a model of urbanism grounded not in control, but in interdependence and resilience.

Urbanism, then, is neither a collection of isolated objects nor a totalized plan, but a living field shaped by evolving relationships. Aalto’s planning operated through an object-and-field logic, mapping and layering buildings within the interstitial landscape to frame a civic infrastructure that supports organic urban growth and defines the *in-between* as a space of resource, adaptation, and renewal.

This thinking emerged in the *Growing House* and *Experimental Town* in Varkaus, Kauttua, and Sunila, which, though only partially realized, framed housing as an elastic settlement system, scalable from the dwelling to town to district, shaping Finland’s postwar reconstruction.⁹

The core of this approach was a simple premise: every home has two fundamental requirements, its *form*, which shelters a family, and its *habitat*, which contributes to the public life of the town, so that housing becomes not an isolated object, but an active participant in a larger civic and ecological field.

To extend these principles, Aalto recognized that meaningful *re-form* required institutional leadership and sought the chairmanship of SAFA, the Finnish Association of Architects.¹⁰ As Chairman, he framed postwar reconstruction as requiring a collective organizational and spatial framework rather than isolated solutions. Drawing on the metaphor of the *embryo*, Aalto advanced housing types as open-ended systems supported by a *communal skeleton*—a shared structural and spatial armature capable of incremental growth without erasing *elementary forms*.¹¹ In doing so, Aalto re-framed reconstruction from replacement to *regenerative development*, establishing

a logic of continuity and adaptation that shaped his later urban and regional work.

This regenerative logic is most clearly articulated in Aalto's plan for Rovaniemi, or the Reindeer Antler Plan. Rather than imposing a rigid form on a war-damaged city, the proposal established a flexible armature aligning circulation, landscape, and civic institutions with topography and ecological systems. Streets, green corridors, and public spaces radiated outward like antlers, creating a porous structure that allowed growth to remain landscape-driven and socially legible. The plan focused not on restoring a lost image, but on reestablishing relationships between settlement and environment—regeneratively rising from the city's ruins through the armatures of the past.¹²

In new growth areas, Aalto developed hexagonal residential lots as a landscape scaffold (Fig. 2). Unlike repetitive rectangular parcels, the geometry preserved vegetation and embedded buildings within a continuous shared landscape, allowing outdoor space to flow between private and communal realms. The system supported incremental growth and small-scale ownership while forming an extended common, with density shaped by *proximity* and shared space rather than zoning, and development unfolding as cultivation rather than erasure.

Rovaniemi established a new planning typology. During and immediately after the Second World War, Finland entered a phase of *liminal development*, an in-between condition that shaped its approach to planning and reconstruction.¹³ Marked by uncertainty, this threshold moment also offered an opportunity to reconfigure relationships between housing, work, landscape, and civic life.

Within this context, Aalto's urban thinking evolved across industrial regions and the infrastructural expansion of Lapland and Imatra, where rapid change demanded new settlement models. He understood urbanism as an evolving civic organism, treating industry and housing as interdependent systems mediated through shared landscapes—parks, waterways, infrastructure, and institutions—that function as commons sustaining ecological continuity, social stability, and collective identity. Rejecting a purely technical definition of performance, he insisted that infrastructure must also cultivate everyday belonging and shared civic life.

Although many of Aalto's larger regional proposals were never fully realized, their strategies were partially enacted in campus projects such as Jyväskylä, with its ring-like template for growth and its integrated gardens, infrastructural landscapes, and intuitive bicycle networks (Fig. 3), and Otaniemi, with its mat-like, multi-level terraced sections designed to be experienced in close relationship with nature (Fig. 4). In

these works, circulation, civic institutions, cultural buildings, and landscape operate as armatures rather than fixed plans.

They also demonstrate that learning and socialization depend not only on formal spaces but also on in-between conditions that support informal, everyday encounters.

The proposals for Helsinki's city center represent a mature evolution of this thinking. Here, Aalto employed *conservative surgery* as a regenerative strategy, reshaping the interstitial fabric rather than pursuing wholesale replacement. Urban form becomes a scaffold for incremental growth across scales—an organic means of cultivating the city through adaptable, macro-to-micro interventions.

While Aalto's plan incorporated north-south and east-west roadways ending in terraced parking at Töölö Bay, it did not prioritize highways like the Smith-Polvinen scheme (Fig. 5); instead, it reshaped the landscape into promenades and platforms, anticipating landscape urbanism by framing culture and nature as co-evolving armatures that render infrastructure habitable and regenerative.

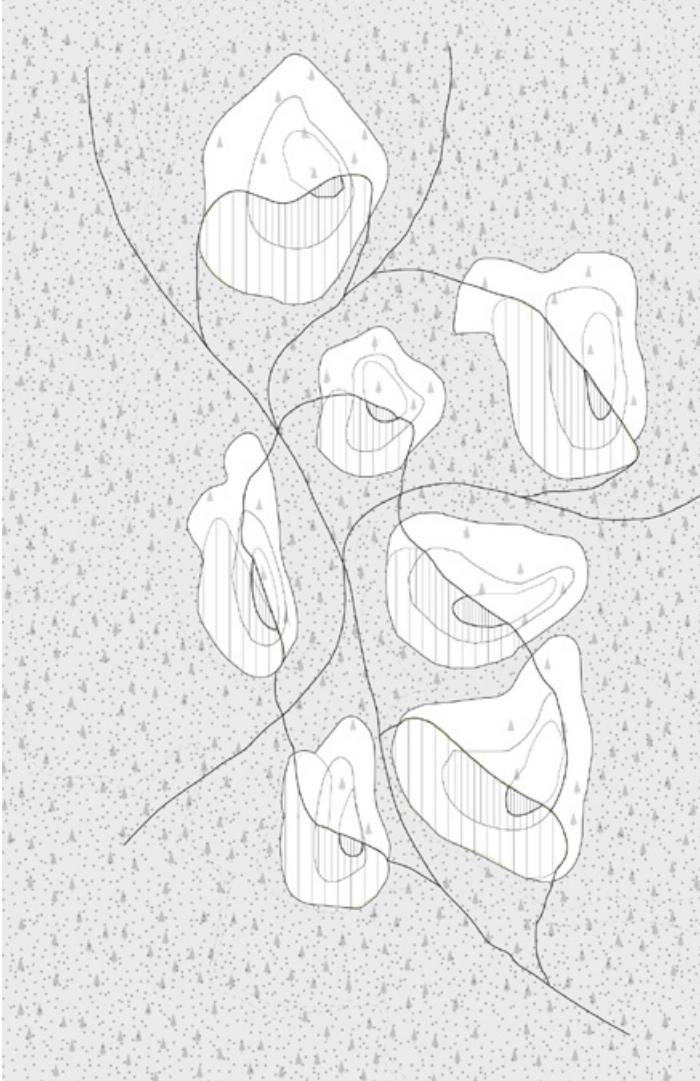
Through this lens, Aalto's urbanism operates as platforms for civic life—spatial, social, and ecological frameworks that enable multiplicity rather than prescribe form. Its analytical value is most significant in liminal conditions, where cities exist between destruction and renewal, memory and projection. Reframed within contemporary debates on regenerative urbanism, Aalto's planning emerges not merely as a historical precedent but as an active framework for shaping resilient, adaptive, and socially inclusive environments that can sustain collective life through transformation.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, "Around 2.5 billion more people will be living in cities by 2050, projects new UN report." <https://www.un.org/en/desa/around-25-billion-more-people-will-be-living-cities-2050-projects-new-un-report> (accessed 26.01.2026).
- 2 Stephen Wheeler, "Built Landscapes of Metropolitan Regions: An International Typology," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 81:3 (2015), 167-190.
- 3 Robert Cody and Angela Amoia. *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design* (London: Routledge, 2025), 1.
- 4 Göran Schildt. *Alvar Aalto: His Life* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007) 408.
- 5 Cody and Amoia, *Alvar Aalto and Urban Design*, 98.
- 6 P.C. Benias, et al. "Structure and Distribution of an Unrecognized Interstitium in Human Tissues." *Scientific Reports* volume 8, Article number: 4947 (2018).
- 7 Ethan Tapper, *How to Love a Forest: The Bittersweet Work of Tending a Changing World* (Minneapolis, MN, Broadleaf Books, 2024), 26.
- 8 Tapper, *How to Love a Forest*, 118.
- 9 Beginning in 1934, Varkaus, AA Type houses were studied with a "Little Paradise" construction program for terrace apartments. In Kauttua, 1936-38, AA Type houses and a prototype terrace house were constructed. In Sunila, 1936-39, single-family-type houses, multi-family block housing, and terrace housing types were constructed.

- 10 Alvar Aalto, "The Reconstruction of Europe is the Key Problem for the Architecture of Our Time," in Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), 149.
- 11 Alvar Aalto, *Post-war Reconstruction: Rehousing Research in Finland* (New York: Finnish Consulate in New York, 1940).
- 12 Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, 149.
- 13 Tapiola is the preeminent example of this typology.

Figures



1. American Town in Finland – The Neighborhood In-Between.
Redrawn after Alvar Aalto Foundation 10-4.



2. The Rovaniemi Flexible Hexagonal Lots Plan.
Redrawn after Alvar Aalto Foundation.



3. The Expandable Jyväskylä Campus Plan.
© Amoia Cody Architecture.



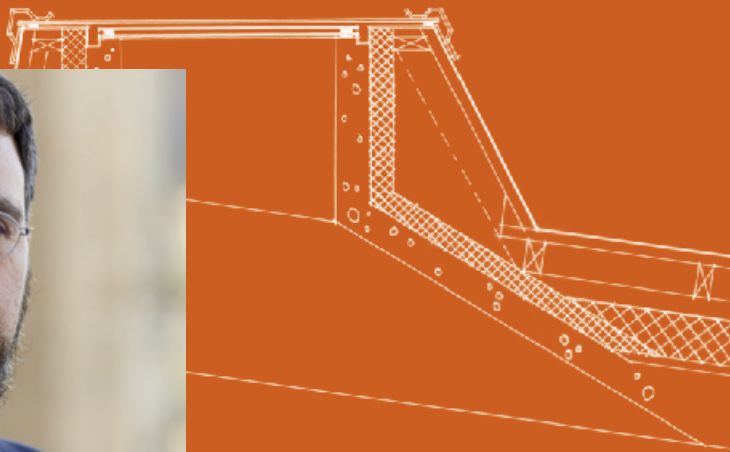
4. Otaniemi Diagram Plan and Section.
© Amoia Cody Architecture.





5. City of Helsinki Roadway Maps - Aalto vs Smith-Polvinen Overlay Site Plan.
© Amoia Cody Architecture.

C o n c e p t s



Martin Düchs

Martin Düchs studied both architecture and philosophy. After graduating in architecture from the Technical University of Munich (Dipl.-Ing.) and philosophy from the Munich School of Philosophy SJ (MA), he worked as an architect while simultaneously completing his doctorate in philosophy at LMU (Thesis: "Architecture for a good life. On the responsibility, morals and ethics of the architect"). He then ran his own architectural firm for some years before writing his habilitation thesis (Thesis: "Humane Architecture: A Philosophical Approach"). In 2017, he spent a year as a visiting fellow at Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge. In 2021, he was appointed full professor of art and cultural history/theory and history of architecture and design at the New Design University in St. Pölten, Austria. He has published numerous works on the history, theory and philosophy of architecture.

A HUMAN MODERNISM, BUT FOR WHICH HUMAN? SCRUTINISING AALTO'S HUMANE ARCHITECTURE WITH THE HELP OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Martin Dücks

The question of “human” in architecture

Alvar Aalto is a pioneer of “human modernism,” with his buildings described as “human”. This reputation is supported by both critics and Aalto himself, who emphasized the need to make architecture more human.¹

However, what does it mean for architecture to be considered human?
What conception of the human is implied when we speak of human modernism?

Clarifying these questions can deepen our understanding of Aalto and others. Yet, the usual disciplines—architecture, architectural theory, history, psychology—struggle to provide an objective account of “human” architecture. Architectural theory is often subjective and normatively charged,² while history and psychology cannot directly evaluate value judgments. Even philosophy, with its long tradition of asking “What is man?”,³ has in recent decades often rejected the question as unanswerable or discriminatory.⁴ Nevertheless, judgments about what is “human” or “inhuman” persist in architecture and elsewhere. So, the question remains relevant, and philosophers have recently argued for its continuing relevance.⁵ For architecture anyway, the question of the human remains crucial both for understanding existing works and for designing future buildings that genuinely serve human needs.

Philosophical anthropology as a tool

Philosophical Anthropology (phA), as developed in the 1920s Germany,⁶ can help clarify what is meant by “human” in architecture. It seeks to ground the understanding of the human in scientific rather than metaphysical terms, while still preserving its normative uniqueness.⁷

The ideas of philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner are particularly relevant, both because they are interesting in their own right and because of their historical proximity to modernism.⁸ He was in contact with figures like Mies van der Rohe and lectured at the Bauhaus and the German Werkbund.⁹ This intellectual exchange suggests that phA can serve as a useful analytical tool for understanding the human

dimension in architecture, and for distinguishing Aalto's approach from that of architects who also claim to prioritize the human but whose work is sometimes labeled as inhuman in a normative sense.¹⁰

Plessner's anthropological laws

Plessner's key concept is "positionality," a spatial category that describes humans as "ex-centrally positioned"—that is, centred, inside and outside themselves. This triple positioning, rooted in the capacity for reflection, makes humans unique.¹¹ Humans can experience, consciously experience that experience, and observe themselves experiencing. From this, Plessner derives three anthropological laws:

1. Law of Natural Artificiality

Humans are "artificial by nature". Unlike animals, humans depend on artificial means to survive and thrive. This necessity for shaping the environment is not a mere adaptation but a fundamental aspect of human existence. Architecture provides the "heaviness" that enables humans to remain and dwell, fulfilling a deep existential need for stability and belonging.¹²

2. Law of Mediated Immediacy. Immanence and Expressivity.

Human experience (immanence) feels direct but is always mediated by sensory organs and hence filtered through subjective interpretation and cultural context. Conversely, expressing an idea in the physical world requires mediation through the body, meaning that physical results are never perfect representations of mental intentions. This leads to an ongoing process of trial and error, which in turn leads to the accumulation of history, which both constrains and enriches human existence. In architecture, this law highlights the tensions between tradition and the striving for something new and between meaning and sensory experience.

3. Law of the Utopian Standpoint

Humans, due to their reflective capacity, never find a solid foundation for their being or thinking. They are always searching, and never fully at rest. Only religion can (somewhat brutally) end the search and offer a firm foundation. This law introduces a fundamental instability and openness in human existence, which is mirrored in architecture's ongoing search for (new) meaning and relevance.

Areas of tension

All three laws are formulated in a paradoxical, seemingly contradictory manner. For architecture, they suggest that humans are characterized by areas of tension—na-

ture and culture, freedom and bondage,¹³ individuality and sociality, body and mind among others. These can be used to create a matrix that captures different facets of human beings. This matrix can then be used to examine architectures in detail with regard to their underlying idea of human beings. By ‘laying’ the matrix like a grid over spaces, building components and statements by the architect, it is possible to check which position is taken in the respective field of tension. Just as a drawing grid can be used to ‘break down’ a human face into individual areas to make it easier to draw (Fig. 1), the matrix of areas of tension can be used to break down a building into individual areas that are relevant to the underlying concept of humanity and to represent it more effectively.¹⁴

The key lies in determining how architecture positions itself within each area of tension. Detailed analyses¹⁵ show that architectures characterised as particularly human—like those of Aalto, Ralph Erskine¹⁶ or Josef Frank¹⁷—generally avoid one-sided profiles within the areas of tension and take both sides into account, while architectures that may be of high quality but are not considered particularly human—such as those of Mies van der Rohe—clearly ‘take a stand’ on one side of all or some areas of tension.

Case study

To illustrate the model, consider the nature-culture tension in the main living rooms of two iconic buildings: Villa Mairea (VM) (Fig. 3) and Villa Tugendhat (VT) (Fig. 2). Both are architectural masterpieces, but only VM is widely considered “human.” This may be because VM appeals to both the natural and cultural sides of the human. The space is clearly cultural—a built, protected environment—but it also emphasizes a deep connection to nature through inside-features like different levels, irregular supports, a “metaphorical” forest of staircase cladding, direct outdoor access, and the use of natural materials. In contrast, VT treats nature as valuable but external. Its space emphasizes artificiality through chrome-plated supports, artificial materials, and flat surfaces. Nature appears only as a view or decoration, not as an integral part of the space. Thus, VT aligns more with culture, while VM balances nature and culture.

Conclusion: Towards a More Precise Understanding of Human Architecture

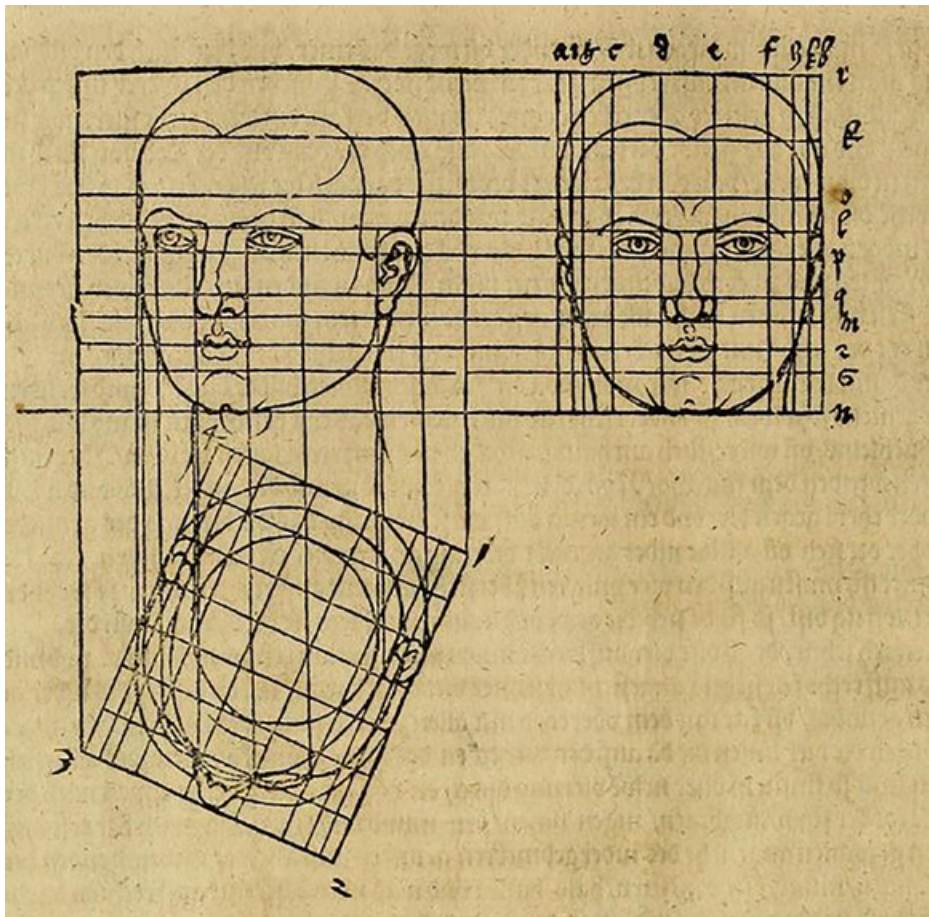
To arrive at a more precise understanding of what makes architecture human, Plessner’s ideas can be used to construct a matrix of areas of tension with which the humaneness of architecture can be studied more precisely. Comparing VM and VT in

terms of the nature-culture tension shows the value of this approach. For a full analysis, more areas of tension and more building parts would need to be considered.

Endnotes

- 1 Winfried Nerdinger (ed.): *Alvar Aalto. Toward a Human Modernism* (Munich, et al.: Prestel, 1999); Nicholas Ray, *Alvar Aalto* (New Haven CN: Yale University Press, 2005). Two examples out of many: Alvar Aalto, "The Humanizing of Architecture", *he Technology Review*, Nov. 1940; and "Mairea", *Arkkitehti*, No. 9, 1939; reproduced in: Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997) 102–107 and 229–230.
- 2 I understand architectural theory to be the theoretical statements of practising architects, which are usually made to justify their own designs. They are generally characterised by subjective value assumptions and do not meet scientific standards. Cf.: Martin Dücks: *Menschliche Architektur. Eine philosophische Annäherung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2026).
- 3 For example, Immanuel Kant: *Logik* (Königsberg, 1800, AA IX) 25.
- 4 Jürgen Habermas, „Anthropologie, philosophische“, in Alwin Diemer and Ivo Frenzel (eds.): *Fischer Lexikon Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1958), 18–35. Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge* (24th ed. 2017. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2017 [1966]).
- 5 Jürgen Habermas and Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016). Some philosophers are even claiming—despite social constructivist criticism—that certain aspects of human nature persist as anthropological constants. At this point, however, it can remain open whether to agree with this.
- 6 The three most important thinkers involved are: Max Scheler (1874–1928), Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), and Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976).
- 7 Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (12th edition. Bonn: Bouvier, 1991 [1928]). Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (3rd ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975 [1928]). Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (7th ed. Frankfurt am Main, Bonn: Athenäum, 1962 [1940]).
- 8 Thanks to recent translations, Plessner's ideas in particular are gaining new international significance. Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). See also: Joachim Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg i. B.: Alber, 2009).
- 9 Helmuth Plessner, "Die Wiedergeburt der Form im technischen Zeitalter. Rede zum 25. Jubiläum des Deutschen Werkbundes 1932", in: *Arch+* 35, 161 (2002 [1932]), 101. Also: Hans-Joachim Dahms, "Mies van der Rohe und die Philosophie um 1930", in: *Arch+* 35, 161 (2002 [1932]), 52–57. As we know from Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe – Das kunstlose Wort* (2nd ed. Berlin: DOM 2016), Mies van der Rohe studied pH A closely.
- 10 Hugo Kükelhaus, *Unmenschliche Architektur* (6th ed. Köln: Gaia, 1988 [1973]). Alexander Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996 [1965]).
- 11 Plessner (1975 [1928]), 292: "Positional, there is a threefold aspect: the living being is body, in the body (as inner life or soul) and outside the body as a viewpoint from which it is both. An individual who is positionally characterised in this threefold way is called a PERSON." Translation MD.
- 12 Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken", in: Otto Bartning (ed.): *Mensch und Raum. 2. Darmstädter Gespräch 1951* (Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlags-Anstalt, 1952), 72–84.
- 13 Using a phrase from Plessner (1975 [1928]) 317.
- 14 See at length: Dücks (2026).
- 15 Cf. Dücks (2026) and Martin Dücks, "Dem Geist die Existenzmöglichkeit bieten" – Ludwig Mies van der Rohes Villa Tugendhat und ihr Menschenbild. In: Michael Zichy (ed.), *Handbuch Menschenbilder* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022), 1–17.
- 16 Mats Egelius (ed.), "Ralph Erskine: The humane architect", in *AD – Architectural Design Vol 47, 11-12* (London: Architectural Design, 1977).
- 17 Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Hermann Czech, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt (eds.), *Josef Frank – against design. The anti-formalist work of the architect* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016).

Figures



1. Albrecht Dürer demonstrating how to "break down" a human face to be able to draw it more easily and exactly. Albrecht Dürer, *Hierin[n] sind begriffen vier bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (Nürnberg. 1528). 228. Available at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00084490?page=,1> accessed 27-01-2026.
Drawing: public domain.

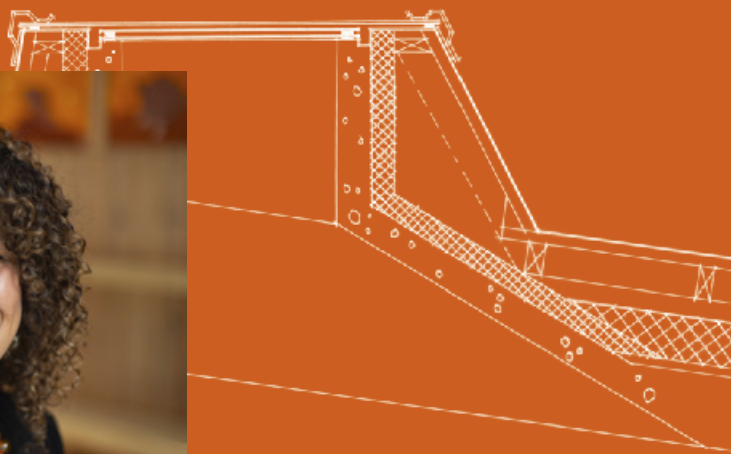


2. Mies van der Rohe: Interior Villa Tugendhat.
 Photo: JensKunstfreund, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



3. Aalto: Interior Villa Mairea.
 Photo: Maija Holma. ©Alvar Aalto Foundation.

C o n c e p t s



Tammy Gaber

Dr. Tammy Gaber is Director and Full Professor at the McEwen School of Architecture, at Laurentian University in Canada. She joined as Founding Faculty in 2013 and helped create new curriculum for the undergraduate and graduate programs. She has won awards for the impact of her teaching and research. She was awarded Canadian Federal SSHRC funding for her research on sacred spaces in 2015, 2021 and 2022. She has published extensively and taught in architecture programs for over two decades. Dr. Gaber's groundbreaking book, *Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design*, published by McGill-Queen's Press in 2022, was profiled in various newspapers, journals, periodicals and television. In 2019, Dr. Gaber won the *Women Who Inspire Award* from the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. In 2020 she was awarded Laurentian University's *Teaching Excellence Award* for a full-time professor, and in 2025 she was awarded Laurentian University's *Research Excellence Award*. In 2024 Dr. Gaber designed and curated an exhibition based on her research on the sacred spaces by the Modernist architects Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto in collaboration with the Alvar Aalto Foundation at the Aalto2 Museum Centre in Finland.

SACRED SPACES: COMMUNITY + CONTINUITY IN AALTOS' ARCHITECTURE

Tammy Gaber

Introduction

This study will focus on sacred spaces and covers gaps in scholarship by examining the built and unbuilt sacred spaces designed by the Aaltos (Alvar, Aino and Elissa), which ranged from small chapels to mortuary complexes, large scale churches and even a mosque. From 1921 to 1994, the Aaltos designed 35 sacred spaces: seven were refurbished, eleven were built and seventeen went unbuilt. This historical examination positions these buildings on a chronological timeline that is supported with the research-creation of three-dimensional (axonometric) drawings of all 35 buildings, created from primary sources. Interesting causal connections are identified, spanning decades and geographies, and are verified through consistent rigorous examination. For example, the seeds of innovative design moves in acclaimed sacred spaces designed by the Aaltos later in their careers, are found in experimental form in early failed competition entries. By considering this typology as a coherent category and utilizing interpretive historical research¹ as a theoretical framework, the identified phenomena are explained in a new holistic narrative form allowing for further insights regarding the evolving nature of the Aaltos' modernism and the design of sacred spaces.

Study of Aaltos' Sacred Spaces

The timeline of the 35 sacred spaces designed by the Aaltos can be divided into three periods: 'Early' includes thirteen projects that Alvar and Aino designed or refurbished from 1921-1927 when their office was in Jyväskylä; 'Middle' when Alvar and Aino moved their office to Turku in 1927 and lasted until the late 1940's during which one of nine sacred spaces they designed were built, and when Aino passed away in 1949; finally, 'Late' with Alvar and Elissa, included eight built and five unbuilt designs. In 1976 Alvar passed away, and Elissa continued the design and supervision of several sacred spaces until her own passing in 1994.

Early in the formative years of the office, Alvar and Aino Aalto worked on the refurbishment of seven historical churches, proposed designs for a bell tower and five sacred spaces – of which only the bell tower and one church were constructed. Refurbished churches that the Aaltos worked on included: Viitasaari, Toivakka, Anttola,

Äänekoski (destroyed by fire in 1968), Kemijärvi (destroyed in war 1945), Pylkönmäki, Korpilahti, and proposals for Pertunmaa. One of the earliest projects by the Aaltos was the completion of the very traditionally designed bell tower at Kauhajärvi. Designed sacred spaces of this period included proposals for churches in Jämsä, Muurame, Jyväskylä funeral chapel and an incomplete proposal for a 'Wooden Church'. These early designs also demonstrated historical influences, such as a Romanesque cloister-like space at Muurame, and the addition of neoclassical decorative motifs for the exteriors of many churches, including arches, columns, and pediments. The architectural plans for all the sacred spaces of this period were very linear, continuing established traditions of longitudinal or cross plans popular in central Finland. The Aaltos similarly designed many of the interior elements such as furniture and light fixtures, utilizing traditional motifs. (Figs. 1 & 2)

In 1927, with their success in the design competition for the Paimio sanatorium, Alvar and Aino moved their office to Turku. During this period, nine design proposals for sacred spaces were created with only one constructed: the 'Rose cellar' at Paimio sanatorium. Many of the design proposals at this time experimented with the plan and section 'wedge' shape inspired by classical theatre design, evidenced in several church design proposals, including Vallila, Tehtaanpuisto, and Tempelaukio. The competition entries of this time were mostly unsuccessful with pointed critique published in the competition spreads in the national architecture journal *Arkkitehti*.² Although the design proposals sketched out were not robustly resolved, they demonstrated experimentation with more sculptural and unique interior elements such as columns, altar spaces and ceiling shapes. During this period, lasting until the late 1940s, several other tumultuous events occurred including the World War when Alvar moved to the US to teach and practice, and importantly, when Aino passed away in 1949. (Fig. 3)

In 1950 Alvar's competition entry 'Sinus' won first place for the design of a church for the city of Lahti. The public acclaim of this win, paralleled with the exponential growth of the success of the Aaltos' firm designing many other buildings, signalled the start of their late period of sacred space design informed by decades of experimentation. Elsa Mäkinen joined Alvar's architecture firm later that year (marrying him in 1952 and changing her name to Elissa Aalto) and collaborated on the design of several sacred spaces. From 1950 to 1976 the Aaltos designed thirteen sacred spaces, of these, eight were constructed. During this period, the press was substantially different than the previous eras, with glowing coverage in *Arkkitehti*; the Aaltos' sacred space designs made the cover several times.³ After Aalto's death in 1976 Elissa continued the design and supervision of several ongoing projects, including completion of the Lahti church in 1979 and the Riola church in Italy, when the tower

was finally constructed in 1994. However, other commissions such as the mosque in Jeddah, had been abandoned when Alvar passed away. (Fig. 4)

Seeds of Innovative Ideas

The design of the sacred spaces of the late period benefitted from decades of iterations across projects. There was a clear difference between the completed projects of the early and late periods. The designed interior elements, including lighting, furniture and iconography, demonstrated a shift from traditionally and historically inspired motifs to bespoke modern designs complementing the innovative sculptural spaces.

The designs for the Lyngby-Taarbaek funeral chapel and the Jeddah mosque complex (both unbuilt) exhibited sophisticated compositions that created various scales of exterior courtyards and gathering spaces. The parishes, including the embedded parish at Seinäjoki and the stand-alone ones in Alajärvi and the Detmerode in Wolfsburg (all built), had restrained budgets and parameters but included innovative interior compositions and the resourceful use of bespoke and Artek catalogue furnishings and lighting. Several design proposals for the design of large churches of this period were commended but not constructed.

Most acclaimed however, were the built churches of the late period. The design of the Cross of the Plains in Seinäjoki bears a striking similarity to the 'Sinus' competition entry for Lahti submitted a year earlier, which was not built. The undulating scalloped interior ceiling, sculptural columns and forced perspective narrowing towards the altar created a very moving and modern interior. The Church of Three Crosses in Imatra was the most sculptural of this period, with tripartite undulation in the roofline and in the plan. This segmentation was emphasized with moveable walls that integrated various community and worship programming. The Church of the Holy Spirit in Wolfsburg exaggerated the 'wedge' shape in section with timber structural members that expressively began at the ground behind the narrow altar and fanned out to form the roofline. At Riola, the only Catholic church designed by the Aaltos, six concrete arches support the wedge-shaped structure, and the roof line opens up in the northern direction facing the Reno River bringing in ample daylight by way of clerestory openings. Finally, the Church of the Cross in Lahti was re-designed twenty years after the winning design competition, for a new site. The Aaltos designed one large building mass: the functions of parish, conference rooms, exhibition space and crypt (below ground) were stacked with the tiered church interior. All of the levels were connected by a dramatic vertical element housing the staircase that also functions as a landmark in the city.

Research-Creation Analysis + Exhibition Curation

The raw materials pertaining to these 35 sacred spaces housed at the Alvar Aalto Archives,⁴ including the drawings, models, photographs, furniture and lighting artifacts along with the author's research and documentation of all of the extant churches, formed the core of research-creation⁵ analysis. In this manner, the materials were synthesized to create digital models that were rendered as 3D 'exploded' axonometric drawings so that all of the buildings could be understood and compared. This important synthesis work was carried out by the author and a team of students from Canada.⁶ The author designed a dedicated exhibition for the Aalto2 Museum which ran from September 24, 2024 until January 5, 2025.⁷ Following this, smaller versions of the exhibition were mounted at the Nelimarkka Museum in Alajärvi and at Säynätsalo Town Hall. The exhibition layout was chronological and revealed the relationships between the designs over the course of five decades. Parallel to the large 3D drawings, the exhibition included textual and visual reflections on major themes in the sacred spaces and original objects were loaned from AAA archives, including furniture, drawings, architectural models, church sconces and three light fixtures that were restored especially for this exhibit. (Fig. 5)

Conclusion: A Holistic Narrative

The highly acclaimed built churches by the Aaltos were not unique eruptions of completion like Athena from the pregnant head of Zues, rather they were the result of several decades of consideration. By examining the projects chronologically as a type, what becomes evident is a story of sustained development of sacred spaces that invite visitors, curate experiences to transition from the everyday world to contemplative and moving interiors for individual and group worship as well as community gatherings. The examination and understanding of the Aaltos' sacred spaces would be incomplete without contextualizing the celebrated, well published, spaces within the five decades of design work, including unbuilt commissions and competition entries, to paint a fulsome picture of a firm dedicated to pursuing the creation of spaces in a dynamic, iterative and very reflective manner.

Endnotes

- 1 Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods, Second Edition* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 136, 141-142, 151.
- 2 *Arkkitehti*, Issue 2, 1929, 27; *Arkkitehti*, Issue 12, 1930, 201.
- 3 *Arkkitehti*, Issue 3, 1951; *Arkkitehti* Issue 12, 1959; *Arkkitehti* Issue 1, 1979.
- 4 Timo Riekko from the Alvar Aalto Archives and Mari Murtoniemi from the Alvar Aalto Museum contributed and supported significantly throughout the research and exhibition process.
- 5 Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada, "Research-Creation": <https://sshr-crsh.canada.ca/en/funding/terminology.aspx#22> (accessed 24.01.2026)

- 6 The following students created the 3D drawings featured in the exhibit: **Graduate cohort:** Sarah Belcher, Livingston Boyd, Zachary Briguglio, MacKenzie Cameron, Lauren Carr, Miles Daigle, John Grzeda, Jonathan Kabumbe, Candice Kinnunen, Sarah Mason, Aaron McRoberts, Janae Rodrigues, Sydney Sheppard, Jacob Smith (2022). **Undergraduate cohort:** Elijah Alkhoury, Noam Aufgang, Sam Ballantyne, Maddison Belanger, Andrew Eveleigh, Humbert Gelas, Ravleen Gill, Kalila Hamilton-Bachiu, Gustav Jost, Isi Lusha, Sasha Sousa (2024). **Graduate Research Assistants:** Laura Auchinleck, Abigail Hudyma
- 7 Aalto 2 Museum Centre, "Sacred Spaces: Community and Continuity in Aaltos' Architecture": <https://aalto2.museum/en/sacred-spaces-community-and-continuity-in-aaltos-architecture/> (accessed 24.01.2026).

Figures



1. Author in front of early period posters for Aalto-design sacred spaces, exhibited at A2, 2024
Photo: Abigail Hudyma © Abigail Hudyma.



2. Early period section of A2 exhibition: posters for Aalto-design sacred spaces, historical church scones and an audio recording of music. Photo: Tammy Gaber © Tammy Gaber.



3. Middle period section of A2 exhibition: posters for Aalto-design sacred spaces, original architectural drawings, loaned furniture and light fixture. Photo: Tammy Gaber © Tammy Gaber.



4. Late period section of A2 exhibition: posters for Aalto-design sacred spaces, original architectural models, restored light fixtures. Photo: Tammy Gaber © Tammy Gaber.



5. Group photo of author with undergraduate student team and graduate research assistants. Photo: Tammy Gaber © Tammy Gaber.

C o n c e p t s



Elie G. Haddad

Elie G. Haddad is a professor of Architecture at the Lebanese American University, where he has been teaching since 1994, and is the dean of the School of Architecture & Design since 2012. Among his publications is the architectural survey *Modern Architecture in a Post Modern Era* (Lund Humphries, 2023), in addition to *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture*, co-edited with David Rifkind (Ashgate, 2014), and a collection of essays he edited as *The Contested Territory of Architectural Theory* (Routledge, 2022). Haddad served as the president of the Association of Arab Architects from 2020 to 2023.

RE-IMAGINING MODERNISM: LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Elie G. Haddad

Prelude: Aalto in Historical Context

In his survey of Modern architecture, the Swiss historian Sigfried Giedion selectively chose the major figures of this new movement, starting with Walter Gropius, presented as its main apostle, followed by Le Corbusier and Mies van de Rohe. In the first edition of the work, published in 1941, Alvar Aalto did not make it into the pantheon of modernists, despite the fact that his major modern project, the Paimio Sanatorium, had been completed in 1932. Yet in the second edition of 1949, Aalto was featured prominently, while others, like Erich Mendelsohn, remained excluded. In Giedion's words, Aalto represented a prime example of a 'combination of standardization with irrationality'.¹ Giedion thus bestowed on Aalto the honor of being one of the 'pioneers' who attempted to embody regional features within the universal language of modernism:

"Aalto embodies the type of architect who can take regional features and translate them into a universal language without ever losing their individual flavor. Regional roots and a worldwide orientation do not conflict in those artists who are sensitive to the mood of our period."²

Decades after Giedion's formulations, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre gave Aalto a prime role in defining a new direction for architecture, which they dubbed 'critical regionalism'. Tzonis and Lefaivre's definition was considerably wide ranging, accommodating the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Aalto in addition to those of Richard Neutra, Oscar Niemeyer, Ernesto Rogers, and Aldo van Eyck amongst others. In their compilation, they featured Aalto's emblematic Town Hall in Saynatsalo, Neutra's Kaufmann House, Safdie's Hebrew Union College, and even MVRDV's Hageneiland Housing and Calatrava's Winery in Spain.³

The Syncretic Approach to Form

In discussing Aalto's influence, I would like to introduce the concept of the Syncretic. Syncretic is a derivative of the Greek word *synkrētismos*, which expresses the idea of coalition and appears in various terms as "syncretic religions," "syncretic societies," all describing entities influenced by two or more

styles. In Aalto's case, this refers to an approach that blends a mature functionalism with the knowledge that traditions impart.

The projects I will be discussing show a similar tendency, though not necessarily a similar aesthetic to Aalto's, in that they aim at a delicate balance between contemporary notions and local traditions.

I will start in India, as the Indian subcontinent provided a fertile ground for its own versions of regional modernism, which began with the work of pioneers like Doshi and Correa. In our times, the work of Anupama Kundoo received international recognition for her revival of traditional crafts and her exploration of sustainable methods of construction. Her buildings feature traditional craftsmanship, while also being experimental, as in her own house situated on the outskirts of Auroville in India. The architect conceived the house as a composition of parallel linear catenary vaults, built of hollow clay tubes for additional insulation, and walls of local bricks, a composition that allows the ambient air to percolate through the wide openings.

Kundoo's Shah Houses in Brahmanghar were built at the edge of a river on agricultural land. The complex is composed of 3 parallel barrel-vaulted elements, connected by lateral wings of basalt stone, with vaults of terracotta, opening to the landscape through wide bays of glass. The complex includes shared accommodation for the caretakers and a cylindrical water tank, also in stone masonry. In contrast to the natural colors and textures of the terracotta and basalt stone, colored oxides on selected plastered surfaces provide a smooth counterpoint that complements the palette of colors.

In China, local architects also moved towards a balance between technology and traditional forms. The firm Standard Architecture built several inspiring works that fall within this spectrum. As the principal architect states, his work aims at creating buildings that are rooted in their historic and cultural settings. One of their works that stands out is the Tibet Visitor Center (2008). Located in a small village in southeastern Tibet, the building serves as a tourist and town center for the villages nearby; including a medical station and service areas. Composed of a series of massive stone walls set into the slope, it appears as an extension of the landscape. Following a footpath, the visitors find their way into the main hall, a long rectangular slab, from where they proceed to the other spaces, all laid out in parallel strips. The interiors provide a refreshing contrast to the rough stone of the walls, with few openings that offer select views to the mountains.

In Africa, Francis Kéré's Startup Lions Campus in Kenya, located on the banks of Lake Turkana, responds to the challenge of youth unemployment by offering professional education and training. The project blends quite naturally within the landscape. Built over two levels that follow the natural slope, it features extensive roof terraces that offer sweeping views and takes inspiration from the mounds built by termite colonies. Tall ventilation towers create a stack effect that naturally cools the working spaces by extracting warm air upwards, while fresh air is introduced through low-level openings. The project is built of locally sourced stone with a plaster finish. In his architectural approach, Kéré not only was inspired by the traditional architecture of the region, but also pays attention to 'natural' elements, in a way synthesizing between nature and artifice.

In the Alps of Europe, some architects adopted this syncretic approach, as in the Cattle Stalls and Abattoir in the Alpine village of Vrin in Switzerland by Gion Caminada. Caminada, who like Zumthor was trained as a carpenter, shows his distinctive skills at marrying different materials: the local stone which serves as the foundation base and the wooden structure on top, a masterpiece of wood craftsmanship.

In the US, the work of Barkow & Leibinger carries some resonance with the work of Aalto. In the House in Bozeman Montana, the architects show a sensitivity to the site. Combining living and working areas, the house is situated at the base of the hilltop, on a gently sloping site. The region is characterized by a mix of farmland with barns and ranch houses, in addition to suburban housing. The organization of the house program into separate wings allows it to "close down" to selected heated areas in winter, saving energy.

In Latin America, the House in Huayocari in Peru by Barclay & Crousse somehow simulated the context of the mountains surrounding the site. Stone foundations form a transitional base between the sloping topography and the upper levels of the house, which are rendered in earth-tone colored concrete. The mild contrast between these 2 materials makes the house appear like an extension of the landscape, with sculptural accents making the house blend into its context. Various openings allow for distinctive views of the mountains.

And finally, in Lebanon, the Terraces House by Elie Abs, provides another example of a sensitive insertion into the landscape. Conceived as an extension to the orchards, laid out in typical stone terraces, the house forms the capstone of the composition, and uses the same stone for its base, while contrasting it with a whitewash finish on its main floor. Composed as a U-shaped plan, it articulates the

functions separating between the public areas at the front, and the bedrooms at the back, connected by the kitchen area. Reminiscent of Aalto's composition for Villa Marea, this house also frames the landscape around it and inserts itself in it in a sensitive way.

Conclusion

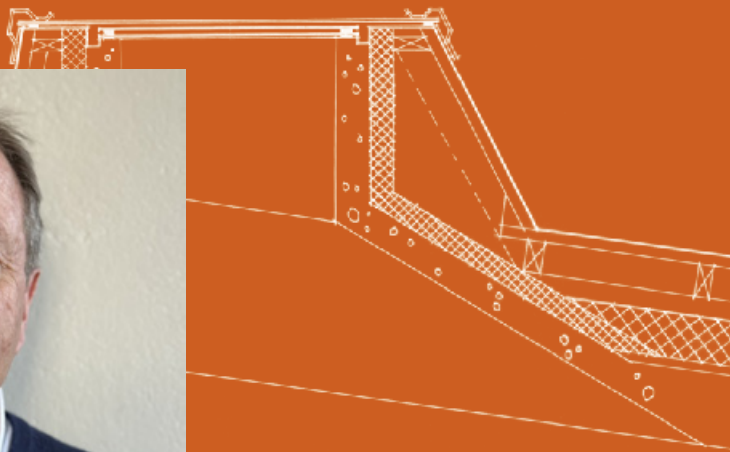
In his 1957 essay "The Architect's Conscience" Aalto stressed that human life consists of both tradition and innovation, and that traditions form the basis of continuity. Continuity, coupled with a keen sense of place, and an empathic approach to human needs, characterized Aalto's design approach. And to quote Juhani Pallasmaa, Aalto conceived buildings not as isolated objects, but as 'sensitive situational responses that seek a dialogue with their context'.⁴

This seems to me the common attribute that is shared by the contemporary architects whom I presented in this essay, and for me, it is the main lesson that architecture can continue to offer.

Endnotes

- 1 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 5th revised edition 2008), 618.
- 2 Giedion. *Ibid.*, 665.
- 3 Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World* (New York: Prestel, 2003).
- 4 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Alvar Aalto: Toward a Synthetic Functionalism" in *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, ed. Peter Reed (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 20-45.

C o n c e p t s



Johannes Kalvelage

Johannes Kalvelage is a professor of urban design and rural planning at Anhalt University in Dessau. Previously he taught in Magdeburg (1996–2006) where he is also based as an architect and urban planner. He studied architecture at TU Darmstadt and at RWTH Aachen. In research and teaching he has been engaged in longstanding academic collaboration with European schools of architecture particularly with Politecnico di Milano and ENSA Nantes. His research focuses on urban morphology, organic architecture and design theory.

ALVAR AALTO IN THE LINE OF ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE

Johannes Kalvelage

The architecture of Alvar and Aino Aalto gained international recognition with their Paimio Sanatorium (1929-1933) establishing a firm functionalist position in alignment with the ideals of CIAM and Walter Gropius in particular. However, we have some indication that Aalto's orientation was gradually moving towards another concept of architecture. Already the Turun Sanomat Newspaper Headquarters in Turku (1927-1933), together with Aino Aalto, indicate a turn in the architectural grammar towards a more natural kind of functionalism, less obvious perhaps in the very rationalistic facades, but intriguingly apparent in the interior coloration, which deviates significantly from the unique hues of Bauhaus and De Stijl.

This led to Aalto becoming the European key player of what could in the best sense be aptly called Organic Architecture, following the concept initially coined by Frank Lloyd Wright as he developed it with reference to nature, site and tactile materials. Over time Wright transformed his architectural position, which was initially rooted in the Arts and Crafts movement, into his philosophy of an organic architecture as a bedrock of American democracy. It is interesting that Alvar Aalto also seems to have followed a similar route some 15 years later and in Finland. This paper explores the links and influences between these two master architects.

When Alvar Aalto was born in Kuortane, near Seinäjoki, on February 3, 1898, as the eldest son of Johan Henrik Aalto, the deputy district surveyor, and his wife Selma Mathilda, Frank Lloyd Wright had already established his Home & Studio on Forest Avenue in Oak Park, Chicago (1889) and built his legendary William H. Winslow House (1894).

As we know from his biographer Göran Schildt, the young Alvar Aalto got hold of a copy of the magazine *Nuori Suomi* from 1907 that included some architectural drawings by Eliel Saarinen. He recalled later in his memories: "I was nine years old when I first made acquaintance with the work of Eliel Saarinen. (....) It was a perfectly ordinary winter morning; I cannot think of anything else that was memorable about it. But from the effect those architectural drawings had on me I can say that a new architect came into the world that morning."¹

Nine years later, in autumn 1916, he enrolled at Helsinki Institute of Technology leaving it as a graduate architect in spring 1921. He had received particular instruc-

tion from Armas Lindgren, a most renowned Finnish architect and former partner with Eliel Saarinen and Herman Gesellius. When Lindgren died in 1929 Aalto wrote in an obituary: "...he represented for us the idea of 'the architect'".² Göran Schildt also notes: "Through Lindgren, Aalto also came into contact with the organic way of thinking of Art Nouveau architects and the best traditions of National Romanticism, which he was soon to renounce formally, but with which he retained a deep spiritual contact."³

Given the urbanity and knowledgeability of his professor Armas Lindgren, it is highly probable that Aalto was being exposed to the ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright after 1919 when Lindgren had become chief instructor at the Department of Architecture as he searched for his "own architecture".

By the time Aalto had decided, at the age of nine, that he wanted to be an architect, Frank Lloyd Wright had finished the famous studio addition with the octagonal library (1898) and established himself as the founder of the Prairie School. Its first truly convincing example was the Frank W. Thomas House (1901) on Forest Avenue, a quarter mile down the road from the Wright's studio. By then, he had executed around 70 projects, including the Larkin Building (Buffalo, 1904), the Thomas P. Hardy House at Racine (1905), and the Darwin D. Martin House (Buffalo, 1904-05).

When Alvar Aalto entered Helsinki Institute of Technology, the Prairie School was in its terminal phase, with Unity Temple (1907-08), the Avery Coonley House (1911) and the Frederick C. Robie House (1909-10) as the shining examples of a new architecture, as published in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe* in 1910 and *Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten* in 1911 by Ernst Wasmuth in Berlin.

It is difficult to imagine that Aalto did not at some point during his studies stumble upon these groundbreaking publications, that were to leave a lasting imprint on architect circles in Berlin and subsequently Europe. However, Aalto remarks in a conversation with Göran Schildt: "As far as Wright is concerned, I knew nothing about him until I came to USA in 1939 and saw his buildings for the first time."⁴

But in an earlier situation, Aalto refers to Wright in a very personal way: "Ties of friendship usually unite people of the same generation. And yet I have counted among my truly close friends some who could be said to belong to the 'grand old' generation, Helene de Mandrot, Henry van de Velde, Frank Lloyd Wright, and, in Finland Yrjö Hirn."⁵ It is evident that Aalto is defining friendship as a matter of transgenerational mental consonance and elective affinity. Wright on his part would possibly

have referred to J.W. Goethe's 'Kindred by Choice', as he was quite occupied with Goethe during his stay in Berlin preparing the Wasmuth-edition of 1910/11. By this time, in any case, his idea of an 'organic architecture' was ready for appropriation.

As early as 1894 Wright wrote: "Go to Nature, thou builder of houses, consider her ways and do not be petty and foolish. Let your home appear to grow easily from its site and shape it to sympathize with the surroundings if Nature is manifest there, and if not, try and be as quiet, substantial, and organic as she would have been if she had the chance. In other words, give the matter some intelligent thought, backed by artistic feeling if you can command it, then go to the woods for your color schemes and not to the ribbon counter at 'Field's'."⁶ This is the first use of the term 'organic' by Wright.

In 1908 Wright enlarged upon the topic of organic architecture: "A sense of the organic is indispensable to an architect; where can he develop it so surely as in this school? A knowledge of the relations of form and functions lies at the root of his practice; where else can he find the pertinent object lessons Nature so readily furnishes? Where can he study the differentiations of form that go to determine character as he can study them in the trees?"⁷

About his life on the farm of the 'Almighty Jones' in the Valley of Spring Green, Wright said: "The Valley taught me everything."⁸ Wright's boyhood in the Valley had been one of Whitmanesque lessons learned from *Leaves of Grass* living up to the annunciation "I celebrate myself..."⁹ In his *Testament* Wright revealed his lifetime faith in Whitman: "I read and respected many of our own poets and philosophers, ... especially the giver of the new religion of democracy, Walt Whitman."¹⁰ Democracy appears as a poetic construction deeply rooted in his childhood experience of an organic relationship with nature.

It stands to reason to assume the *Prairie School's* point of origin in the lush meadows of the Valley. Later in the garage of Wright's first real project he and his client William H. Winslow jointly established a printing-workshop to publish an author's edition of a book featuring Wright's photography of wildflowers and prairie grass.¹¹ What seems so playful is in fact a turn of eras, bringing into position 'organic architecture' as an instrument of radical cultural transformation.

Conceiving nature as a fundamental force in their lives, both Wright and Aalto were aware of the interdependency of spatial and temporal events. For Aalto the reference to the forests of Kuortane and his summers at Alajävi at the age of twelve correspond to Wright's tiring but existential experiences on the farm of his Unitarian

uncle James Lloyd Jones. Both Wright and Aalto, each in his individual way, were deeply bound up with trees. Wright's nature lesson about trees is mirrored by Aalto's Savoy Vase from 1936, blown into a wooden mould made of a piece of a trunk.

The rural experiences of Wright and Aalto matched with a rustic design philosophy are revealed in the architecture of them both. It is known that Aalto in particular liked the Niemelä farm in the Seurasaari open-air museum in Helsinki with its all-purpose room, the Finnish farmer's *tupa*.¹² Aalto refers to it in his article "The Housing Problem" published in *Domus* in 1930.¹³

Fallingwater (1935-37/guesthouse -39), of which Robert C. Twombly wrote "...it was undoubtedly Wright's nature poem to modern man,"¹⁴ and Villa Mairea (1939) may illustrate the concurrence in establishing a sphere of plain 'being' in the 'single living room', with a fireplace as a central element safeguarding human existence.

Whilst influenced from afar, Alvar and Aino Aalto could have seen some of Frank Lloyd Wright's works on their first trip to the US in 1938 and eventually met him in person on their second trip to the US in 1939. Maire Gullichsen, the client-owner of Villa Mairea, recalls visiting an exhibition in the MOMA on the occasion of the 1939 World's Fair in New York with photographs of villas by Le Corbusier, one by Frank Lloyd Wright, undoubtedly Fallingwater, and of the 'Mairea'. It is not unlikely that Wright was present in this context.

There is no doubt that Aalto was attempting to outcompete Wright in the field of elementary design and to be on an equal footing in organic architecture. The fireplace in Aalto's Villa Mairea is not only the focal point of the house, as in Fallingwater, but of the entire clearing, the villa translating the forest into architecture.

Whenever Alvar and Aino Aalto came across the postulations of Frank Lloyd Wright, they were at any rate the European architects who committed themselves to them in the most perfect way. The 'Mairea' was their nature poem to modern Finland, a masterpiece of art and technology, but ultimately an iconic example of organic architecture, coequal with Fallingwater.

Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid., 123.
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- 5 Schildt (ed.), *Sketches: Alvar Aalto*, 115.

- 6 Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright: Selected Writings V1* (New York: Rizzoli/Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1992), 23.
- 7 Ibid., 86.
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- 9 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1st ed.).
- 10 Edgar Kaufman and Ben Raeburn (eds.), *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings* (New York: Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation/Horizon Press, 1960), 303.
- 11 Frank Lloyd Wright and William Herman Winslow, *The House Beautiful* (Wright/Winslow: orig. pr. 1898 / Reprint: ed. John Arthur, Portland OR: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996).
- 12 Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: His Life*, 387.
- 13 Ibid., 420.
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Figures



1. Alvar and Aino Aalto, Turun Sanomat Building, interior, Turku, 1927–33.
Photo: Johannes Kalvelage, © Johannes Kalvelage



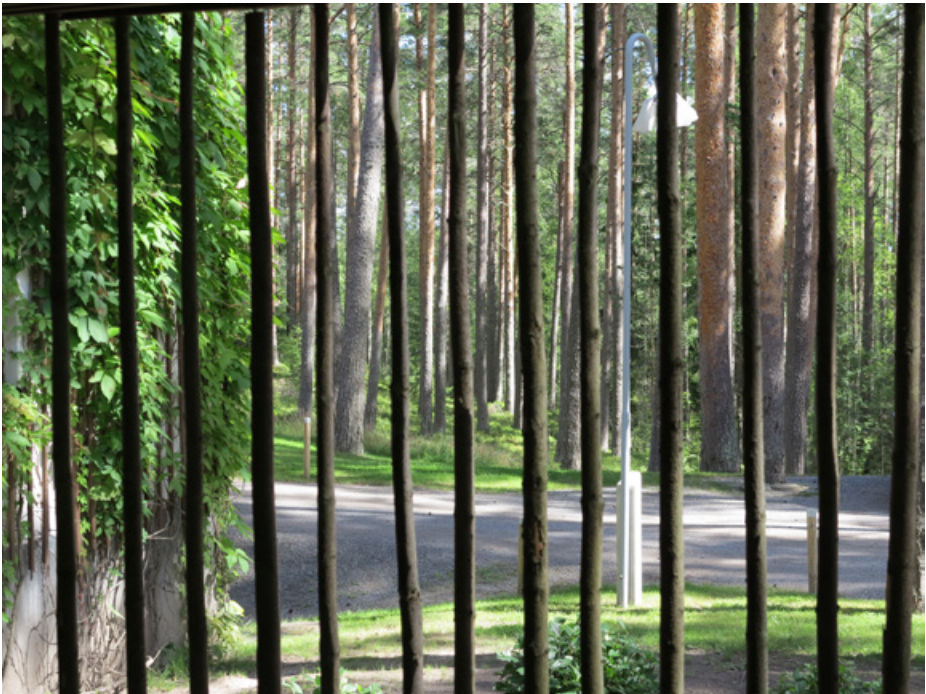
2. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Home and Studio," Oak Park/Chicago.
Photo: Johannes Kalvelage, © Johannes Kalvelage



3. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Fallingwater," Bear Run/PA, 1935.
Photo: Johannes Kalvelage, © Johannes Kalvelage

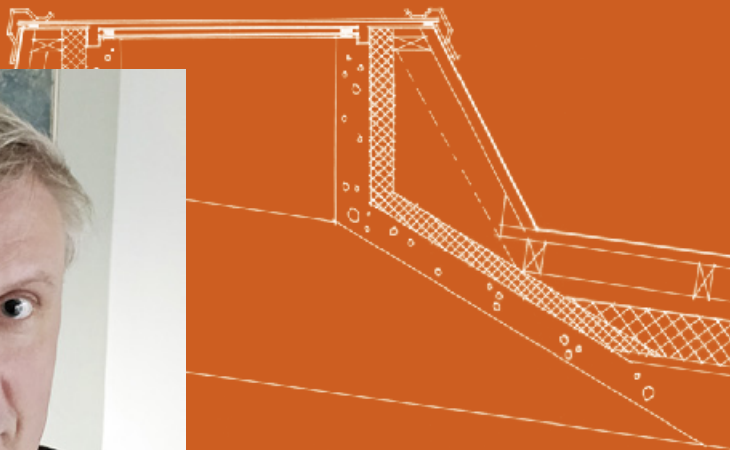


4. Alvar and Aino Aalto, "Villa Mairea," Noormarkku, 1937–1939.
Photo: Johannes Kalvelage, © Johannes Kalvelage



5. Alvar and Aino Aalto, "Villa Mairea," entrance, Noormarkku, 1937–1939.
Photo: Johannes Kalvelage, © Johannes Kalvelage

C o n c e p t s



Mikko Lindqvist

Architect Mikko Lindqvist works in Helsinki City Museum Cultural Environment Department in the field of restoration and building preservation. He has done research and a monograph on the Neoclassical architecture of Helsinki, concentrating on its environmental relations. Lindqvist has co-published books on Helsinki's historic architecture and urban development. He has lectured on architecture history in the Helsinki Open University and Aalto University in Espoo.

CHANGING NATURE – ALAJÄRVI FORESTS AS CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Mikko Lindqvist

Nature and humanism are the central concepts in the interpretation of Alvar Aalto's architectural idiom since Sigfried Giedion's classical works,¹ and indeed Aalto's works and writings have given a firm basis for this. Affiliation to nature and humanism is often traced back to the early experiences of Aalto's childhood in Central Western Finland, where his family lived and father worked as a land surveyor. The connection to nature has also been associated with the extraordinary mode of creativity in Aalto's life. In this paper I will explore these phenomena by following the evolving concepts of nature and forests in Alajärvi in the early 20th century, a location that in many respects was Aalto's homestead.

Primeval forests

Alajärvi's history is engaged closely with the local landscape and its changes over time. Alajärvi and its vicinity were long characterized by vast uninhabited wilderness. The region was the hinterland of the fertile and relatively urbanized Bothnian coastal region (Figure 1). The transformation of these wildernesses into colonized farming landscape began only in the 16th century and continued until the reconstruction period following World War II. In this process, local forests were of great interest. Traditionally, forests were a commonly utilized resource; enjoyed for slash and burn farming, collectively burnt for tar, and its timber used for construction. In the 18th century local waterways connected the area to the coastal towns where international tar and timber trade networks were reached. As a sign of the growing welfare, the first chapel of the Alajärvi parish was built in 1751.²

Changing wilderness

The nationwide Great Partition was implemented in Alajärvi from the early 19th century onwards. This resulted in the redistribution of common farmland and forests to individual farms as economically independent units, while large areas of the forests remained in the ownership of the crown. Mapping the wilderness and carrying out land distribution was one of the tasks of land surveyors. They divided smaller farm plots from larger base farms and, what is special, created new farms from crown forests. This work required mastery of surveying techniques, but also the ability to assess the viability of the land for new use. Alvar Aalto's father J.H. Aalto surveyed

over 400 sites in and around Alajärvi between 1898 and the late 1930s, and this work was continued by Aalto's younger brother Väinö into the post-war period.³

The size of the new settlements was defined by state legislation. The upper limit for a settlement farm was set at 20 hectares. In the early 1920s, as many as 76% of the Finnish farms had less than 10 hectares of fields. The viability of small farms had to be secured during the measurement process, which was in the hands of the surveyors. National small-farm policy had a manifold ideological background. One element of it was securing the nationalization of forest assets from forest companies that were growing in influence. The landless and poor were granted land and a livelihood. They were quintessential *little people*, and this form of social structuring had wide implications until the present day.⁴ (Figure 3)

Land surveying was in many ways closely related to the organization of state forestry. Crown forests were supervised by a special professional group of forester managers, whose academic-vocational training had begun in Evo in Häme province in the late 1850s. This was the institution where Aalto's grandfather H.H. Hackstedt worked and taught, leaving a strong impression on the young Alvar. The duties of forest rangers included the care and responsible development of forests.⁵ It required knowledge of nature and responsibility for the national values that were associated with it. The pre-Great Partition use of communal forests had significantly taxed forest resources in Alajärvi. A reconstructive policy was implemented by the forester J.H. Thomé (in office 1877-1905), a family acquaintance of the Aaltos.⁶ His management area included an enormous area – 35,000 hectares – comparable to the largest of the present day national parks.

Forests had increasing importance as national assets for industry, as well as a source for the expansion of settlements, and this was very much the case in Alajärvi. Forests were nurtured and exploited, and on the other hand land was utilized as a resource for small farms. Within these contradictory circumstances, the ideal aim was to achieve a viable harmony between nature and human use. Here the concept of nature expands from a conceived landscape to a more fundamental understanding of forests as living environments (Figure 2). This ideal was inherent both in the professions of forest managers and land surveyors, and are descriptive also of Alvar Aalto's architectural ethos. The professional identity of foresters, the land surveyors and finally an architectural approach concentrated around a biological and human relation to nature, forming a societal and cultural lineage whose roots were tangible in Aalto's formative years in Alajärvi.

The foresters' perspective

A fine expression of the foresters' values and ethos can be found in an academic ethnographic expedition to Alajärvi in 1956, which resulted in a later monograph on local history and culture.⁷ In the study, the University of Helsinki's first professor of forest economics, academician and Alajärvi native Valter Keltikangas (1905-1990) compiled an article describing the natural conditions of Alajärvi's forests.⁸ Keltikangas had a folk-like connection to nature, in keeping with the tradition of foresters. His academic work in forest economics had awakened in him the need for forest conservation as well, ideas which he fulfilled in his role as an author on nature.

In his article about the Alajärvi forests, Keltikangas particularly prized primeval forests that had self-seeded and grown to a mature form without interruption. The characteristic features were long-lived giant trees, often spruces and pines, which he described in architectural terms as pillars of the forest. Primeval forests possessed the most valuable timber and had also aesthetic qualities. The development of primeval forests occurs through succession, in which species compete for space. Step by step, different plants conquer domination for a period, and over a long span of time a stable equilibrium is finally reached in the flora of the forest. In the end, the landscape reflects the balance of nature in the environment and communicates the authentic character and its capacities for it. In Keltikangas's words: "Its spectacularity is the beauty of perfect structural balance, and as such, perhaps only a forester-artist can fully comprehend it."⁹ (Figure 4)

Keltikangas notifies the disappearance of primal forests from southern Finland. At the beginning of the 20th century wilderness prevailed in the untouched crown forests of Alajärvi, but most people no longer knew about them. The once mighty Alajärvi state forest management area had been abolished. The symbolic termination of it was the subdivision of the forester Thomén's Mustakorpi estate into a settler's farm in 1949. The survey work for that was carried out by Alvar's brother Väinö. Keltikangas stated that primal forests were a testimony of time and history, trees being a living link to the natural history of the place and its settlement history, looking back hundreds of years.

Nature as experience

In Aalto's view, the genuine question in architecture is how to create positive and pleasant environments with simple tools, so that the environment corresponds to human biological needs.¹⁰ These were goals that both foresters and surveyors during his maturing years were aiming at, and which Aalto elevated to the field of culture

and architecture. Reflecting on the context of forest culture in the early 20th century, Aalto's realist perception of nature was a deeply rooted understanding of the changing environment and its connection to people and their lived experiences.

To what extent this understanding – the experience of nature – functioned as a structure of knowledge and accumulative culture, or rather of subjective experience, became a consequential question in the intellectual atmosphere of early 20th-century Finland.¹¹ This is the time when the ideas and books of philosopher Henri Bergson became widely known in Finland, inspiring the arts and philosophy. Bergson was seen offering an alternative to the ever-expanding dominance of the positivist natural sciences, which had a profound effect on society and life, and also on landscape and nature.

Professor Eino Kaila (1890-1958) was the early disseminator of Bergson's ideas in Finland and in Finnish.¹² Kaila was born in Alajärvi, the son of a local vicar. It was also in Alajärvi where his formative experience on the vocation of philosophy took place. True reality was intuitively revealed to him on a sunny day at lake Alajärvi in 1907: "We are merely oscillating particles of an over compassing unity, nature... As we are part of this unity and its life, there is no other transcendental force." (Figure 5) In Kaila's philosophy, nature was perceived as direct reality, having a life of qualities and constant movement, becoming part of the perceiver's life.¹³

In his own philosophical work, Kaila sought to find a synthesis between positivist empiricism and bergsonian life-philosophy. His importance in the formation of interwar Finnish intellectual culture is considered central. I claim that Aalto's *l'elan vital* can be seen as part of this cultural discourse in early and mid-century Finland. Bergsonian *la durée* is also a concept that unites Aalto's experiences of nature and human culture in Alajärvi, Northern Italy, Greece, France, Sweden or Spain in a synthetic whole. *La durée* forms an experiential living reality which finds expression in his environmental work, uniting places and histories.

Legacy

In the early 20th century Alajärvi was a breeding ground for an astonishingly rich range of influential cultural movements in Finland. A lot of this is related to the special condition of nature, its conceptualization and dramatic changes. In the Aalto canon, Alajärvi and Jyväskylä landscapes appear as places of early childhood unmeditated experiences. Especially Alajärvi provides a deeper and consequential context for the environmental relations in Aalto's later works, which become evident on a closer reading. This context opens possibilities for further research and inter-

pretation. Understanding of the forest culture of Aalto's era can also assist today in questions of maintenance and care in some of Aalto's environments. Aalto's legacy is there to activate our senses and enliven our relationship to nature.

Endnotes

- 1 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1949 2nd edition), 565–569.
- 2 This church was the first edifice of local master builder Antti Hakola and it precedes the present Engel church from the 1830s.
- 3 In state survey archives there are 435 surveys signed by J. H. Aalto and 305 by Väinö Aalto. Maanmittaushallituksen uudistusarkisto (1634-1960). Vaasan lääni: J. H. Aalto (435 maps), V. Aalto (305 maps).
- 4 Martti Häikiö and Jouko Kokkonen (eds.), *Svinhufvud – Suomen itsenäisyyden tekijät ja vaiheet. Asutuslait täydensivät torpparivapautusta – ja olivat osa maaseutuun nojannutta politiikkaa*, n.d.: <https://xn--itsenisyyys-u5a.fi/asutuslait-taydensivat-torpparivapautusta-ja-olivat-tarkea-osa-nuorentasavallan-maaseutuun-nojannutta-yhteiskuntapolitiikkaa/> (accessed 26.2.2026)
- 5 Leena Paaskoski, *Herrana metsässä: Kansatieteellinen tutkimus metsänhoitajuudesta* (Helsinki: SKS, 2008), 149–152.
- 6 Marko Paavilainen, *Murhatut veljet – Valter, William ja Ivar Thomén elämä ja kuolema* (Helsinki: Siitola, 2016), 20–32.
- 7 Aulis Ojajärvi (ed.), *Kyrönmaa XIII Alajärven elämää* (Helsinki: Etelä-Pohjalaisen osakunnan kotiseutujulkaisuja, 1966).
- 8 Valter Keltikangas, "Katoava luonnonmaisemamme", in *Kyrönmaa XIII*, ed. Aulis Ojajärvi (Helsinki: Etelä-Pohjalaisen osakunnan kotiseutujulkaisuja, 1966), 68–88.
- 9 Ibid., 77. Author's translation.
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- 13 Mikko Salmela, *Suomalaisen kulttuurifilosofian vuosisata* (Helsinki: Otava, 1998), 113-200.

Figures



1. Untouched primal forest in Saarijärvi 1907.
Photo: Faltin © Museovirasto CC BY 4.0



2. A settlement farm in Toivakka 1952.
Photo: Nasakuva © Museovirasto CC BY 4.0



3. A settlement farm in Kuhmo 1925.
Photo: Ekström © Museovirasto CC BY 4.0

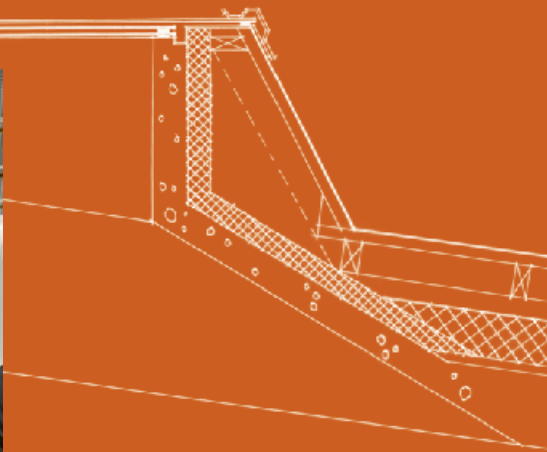


4. Primal forest in Pyhä-Häkki National Park, 1965.
Photo: Urpo Häyrynen © Metsämuseo Lusto CC BY 4.0.



5. Aerial photo of Alajärvi village in the 1930s.
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C o n c e p t s



Aino Niskanen

Aino Niskanen, architect MA, PhD was Professor of History of Architecture at Helsinki University of Technology/ Aalto University in 2007-2018. She has written about public interiors in 19th century Munich, co-operative society architecture in Finland, Alvar Aalto, Reima and Raili Pietilä and Finnish architecture of the 1960s. She has been a member of the board of The Finnish National Council of Architecture and Design, the Alvar Aalto Foundation and the Association Alvar Aalto en France.

PERMISSION TO QUOTE: CHANGES OF DIRECTION WITH THE POSTMODERNIST PERIOD

Aino Niskanen

New interpretations

The Western cultural change that began in the 1960s has been called *postmodernism*. The name best describes the changes in the climate of attitudes; attaching *postmodernism* as a label to architecture, however, is not a simple task. In the field of architecture, the criticism of modernism was directed at the dogmatism of its doctrines, the one-sided belief in the future, and the lack of history – typical even in the Finnish architectural climate in the 1960s and 1970s. Modernism had been largely history-denying, but now permission had been granted to be inspired by history. We Finns began to understand and defend – often belatedly – neo-Renaissance architecture, Art Nouveau began to interest us, and the architecture of the 1920s became visible. The way architecture was being shaped was freed from the straightforwardness and material scarcity of modernism – which felt liberating. International studies showed new aspects, including classical features, in Aalto's architecture (Fig. 1).¹ The Finnish architecture journal *Arkkitehti* became more international in the late 1960s and, for example, Robert Venturi's book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) was reviewed in 1968.² It was not until after Aalto's death in 1976 that the first Finnish historical studies about him appeared. The Nordic Classicism of the early 20th century received an extensive exhibition and publication in 1982, which also made visible Aalto's previously largely unknown production from the 1920s.³ Göran Schildt's monograph series began in 1984 and served as a starting point for Finnish research on Aalto and the appreciation of his architectural heritage (Fig. 2). It was also during the 1980s that the first Finnish architecture that visibly applied postmodern elements was published. Architects felt they had permission to be ironic and tell stories: Simo and Käpy Paavilainen, in their presentation of their Olari Church (1981), discussed the construction site's similarity to the Roman Imperial Fora (Fig. 3).⁴

The circle of designers who called themselves constructivists had distanced themselves from Aalto in the 1960s and largely in the 1970s.⁵ Foreign scholars saw Aalto's architecture in the light of then current, international themes. A critical perspective on Aalto came from one of his architect contemporaries, Kirmo Mikkola, though his interpretation of Aalto changed from the 1950s to the late 1970s. He wrote various articles about Aalto from 1976 onwards and in 1985 published a monograph on Aalto for a Finnish audience.⁶ In his writings, Mikkola emphasized

Aalto's profound thinking and cultural philosophy. During the 1950s, however, Mikkola had seen Aalto as "so much an institution that his future influence is small."⁷ As such, alongside Göran Schildt's monographs, it was the growing foreign interest in Aalto that prompted domestic scholars such as Mikkola to interpret Aalto more broadly. Anni Vartola has interpreted the change in Finnish attitudes as coming from the pressure imposed by postmodernism in the mid-1970s. Finnish architecture was even urged to strive to build on Aalto's legacy.⁸ But did it happen like that? According to Mikkola, the Aalto school could never have been born, Aalto was too inimitable for that.⁹ But of course, the use of materials and forms favoured by Aalto was made easier in the permissive atmosphere of postmodernism. Representatives of the northern, so-called Oulu school favoured red brick and wood in their buildings, which was undoubtedly influenced by Aalto's works.¹⁰ The tenets of postmodernism included questioning authenticity and the myth of genius, which gave permission not only to be inspired by history but also to quote it. Kristian Gullichsen's description of his Kauniainen Church (1984) in *Arkkitiehti* even provocatively cites a page number: "The ornamentation at the main entrance is taken from Carolus Lindberg's doctoral thesis¹¹ and the espalier archway from Le Corbusier (Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre Complète 1910-1921*, page 123. The undulating masonry with wooden trelliswork is somehow derived from Alvar Aalto."¹² In his presentation in *Arkkitiehti* of the Poleeni Cultural Centre (1989) in Pieksamäki, Gullichsen referred to the municipality's functionalist heritage: "The figure of Alvar Aalto looms in the background."¹³ The soft arches associated with the simplified white functionalist forms and the undulating interior staircase are familiar from Aalto's architecture (Fig. 4).

Collections grow, "Aalto tourism" emerges

Jyväskylä was a city close to Aalto: he had attended school there and established his first office there. In Jyväskylä, you can encounter Aalto's early designs as well as his major later works, most notably the University of Jyväskylä campus (1951-57), Aalto Museum Centre (1957-1974), police station (1970), city offices (1978) and city theatre (1982) (the latter three being part of the Jyväskylä administrative centre plan). The atmosphere in Jyväskylä was culturally positive and Aalto was respected. Even in the 1960s, Aalto did not experience in Jyväskylä the same rejection as a "symbol of decline" from his younger colleagues in Helsinki.¹⁴ Personal ties to the city remained and Aalto often appeared at the cultural events organised as part of the annual festival Jyväskylä Summer.¹⁵ The modest-sized city in Central Finland grew from the trappings of Aalto's architecture into a cultural centre that people from far away would visit. In 1966, Aalto was asked to design a museum in Jyväskylä that would house all of his drawings, architectural models, and prototypes of objects. Aalto expressed his opposition to such a cult of personality and refused.¹⁶ Howev-

er, Aalto later designed the eponymous Alvar Aalto Museum (1973) located next to the Central Finland Museum (1961), intended for temporary exhibitions and the Jalo Sihtola art collection. As part of the exhibition, a collection of Artek furniture was placed there. In the 1970s, the collection was expanded mainly with furniture and design objects. The first limited permanent exhibition was opened in 1978. After 1986, when international interest in postmodernism increased, a permanent exhibition was organized to also include Aalto's early works.¹⁷ The Alvar Aalto Foundation was established in 1969 with the mission of preserving Aalto's life's work. The Foundation and the Alvar Aalto Museum merged in 1998. The most significant addition to the museum's collections was the design collection in 1998. The entire Aalto archive was moved from Helsinki to Jyväskylä in 2003. The drawings, documents and photographs were housed in the fine premises of the Provincial Archives while the scale models and design collection are held in Kanavuori. The most important collections include approximately 85,000 architectural drawings, a design collection comprised of approximately 2,500 objects, and a photography collection of approximately 55,000 photos.¹⁸

Foreign interest in Aalto was a significant impetus for opening Aalto's legacy to an ever-wider audience. Since 1979, international Alvar Aalto symposia have been regularly organized in Jyväskylä, bringing together both international and Finnish researchers. Aalto buildings have become museum sites: the Aalto studio and home in Munkkiniemi, and, after Elissa Aalto's death in 1993, the Muuratsalo summer villa. Similarly, there has been a gradual awakening to the preservation of Aalto's architectural heritage. Several of Aalto's buildings have been renovated, received extensions or repairs of various sizes.¹⁹ A young generation of Finnish architects has devoted its talents to a creative dialogue with Aalto's architecture (Fig. 5). The number of Aalto tourists from abroad continues to grow. In a certain sense, the Aalto heritage has been productized. The starting point for the expanded activity focused on Aalto can be considered the interpretation of Aalto architecture derived from international postmodernism.

Endnotes

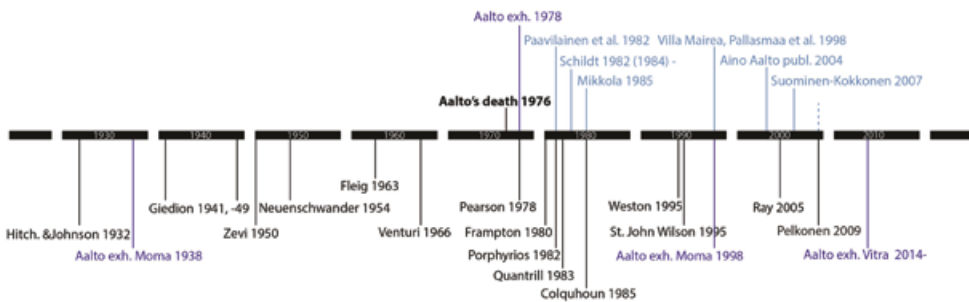
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- 2 Aino Niskanen, "From Utopia to Reality", *Arkkitehti*, 2/2003, 80–87.
- 3 Simo Paavilainen (ed.), *Nordisk Klassicism – Nordic Classicism 1910-1930* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1982).
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- 8 Vartola, *Kuritonta monimuotoisuutta*, 163–164.
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- 10 Heikki Kaikkonen, *Heikki Taskisen arkkitehtuuri* (Helsinki: OKU Publishing, 2012), 56, 65.
- 11 Carlous Lindberg, *Om teglets användning i finska medeltida gråstenskyrkor* [On the use of brick in Finnish medieval churches] (Helsingfors: Akademiska Bokhandelen, 1919).
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- 13 Kristian Gullichsen, "Kulttuurikeskus Poleeni, Pieksamäki", Gullichsen Kairamo Vormala Arkkitehdit KY, *Arkkitehti*, 8/1989, 44.
- 14 Louna Lahti, *Alvar Aalto -museo 1966–1986* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museo, 1987), 7.
- 15 Jyväskylä Summer, which began in 1956, is the oldest continuous cultural event in the Nordic countries.
- 16 Lahti, *Alvar Aalto -museo 1966–1986*, 7.
- 17 The drawings collection and the office's photo and document collections were the property of the Aalto Foundation even before this merger. Teija Isohauta, phone discussion, February 2025.
- 18 Timo Riekko, email to the author, 23.3.2025.
- 19 These include: Lappia House, Rovaniemi (underground extension, 2015); Seinäjoki Library (new extension, 2012); the student cafés Lozzi and Ilokivi at the University of Jyväskylä (extensions, 2015); Aalto2 Museum, Jyväskylä (museum extension, 2023); Aalto University Library, now Harald Herlin Learning Centre in Otaniemi (underground extension, 2016), Enso Gutzeit building, Helsinki (interior renovation and remodelling, 2013); Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (new exhibition gallery, 2016); House of Culture, Helsinki (new gateway to the adjacent building, 2013). Tommi Lindh, email to the author, 2024.

Figures



1. Helsinki University of Technology, main building and lecture hall, Alvar Aalto 1955-64. Exterior view.
Martti Kapanen, around 1980. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



2. A timeline of selected publications and expositions on Aalto both in Finland and abroad.
© Aino Niskanen



3. Olari Church, Espoo, Käpy and Simo Paavilainen Architects, 1981.
Photo: © Jussi Tiainen.



4. Poleeni Cultural Centre, Varkaus, Kristian Gullichsen, 1989.

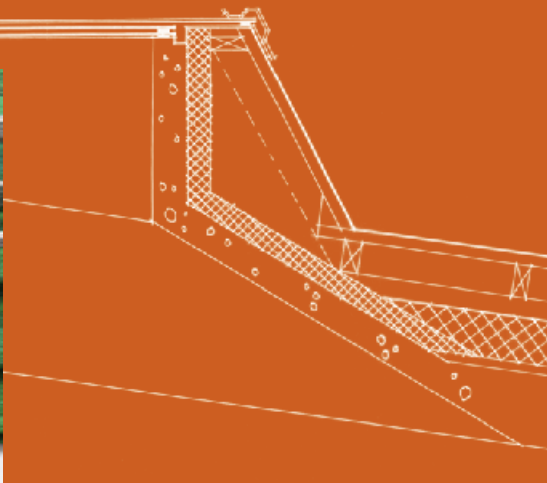
Interior view.

Photo: © Jussi Tiainen.



5. The extension to the Seinäjoki Library, JKMM Architects, 2012,
built next to the Seinäjoki Library by Alvar Aalto, 1965.
Photo: Tuula Pöyhiä, © Alvar Aalto Foundation.

C o n c e p t s



Anja Quinn

Anja Quinn is a British-Finnish graphic designer living in Bristol, UK. She holds a master's degree in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths, University of London, which shaped her theoretical interest in architecture within the field of visual cultures. She is currently researching the ways in which art and architecture intersect. With an interest in critical theory and dialectics, Anja seeks to understand how developing architecture in the neo-liberal sphere can both hold and reject artistic values simultaneously. In addition, Anja is a Trustee at Arnolfini Arts, an international centre for contemporary arts.

FUNCTIONALISM'S CONTRADICTION IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Anja Quinn

Alvar Aalto once stated that “the structures which were means to create a new architecture have been wrested from us and turned into commercialised decorative ends in themselves with no inner value”.¹ The following paper aims also to analyse how aspects of early functionalism continue to exist today in the neoliberal city, albeit from within a contradiction that shatters the functionalism of life that early modernism envisioned. Considering the 1965 text “Functionalism Today” by Theodor Adorno,² this paper argues that Adorno’s dialectical critique of functionalism enables us to understand how the reinterpretation of functionalism in contemporary architecture reinforces a heterotopia of disengagement from the city. We’ll then conclude with how, in contradistinction to this, Aalto’s understanding of functionalist architecture and city planning more widely could envision a more promising alternative.

Let us begin with the historical context of the modernist period which shifted away from the ornamental Art Nouveau style of the 19th century in favour of functional, minimalist design. Early advocates, including Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, and, indeed, Aalto, intended to reject the unnecessary detail of the previous era which, according to the movement, limited productivity by spending surplus labour and personal time on superficial decoration with limited intrinsic value.³ Ornamental architecture and interiors were considered wasteful to the inhabitant who lived in excess and, consequently, lacked the freedom and imagination to thrive. The significance of this perspective guides the following discussion, for early modernism was a rebellion, a rejection of excess in order to live in beauty *and* function.

Yet Adorno’s “Functionalism Today”,⁴ a response to Adolf Loos’ bold “Ornament and Crime”⁵ written half a century prior, presents a dialectical reading of this periodic shift. The text critiqued Loos’ understanding of functionalism as a rejection of style, which Adorno claimed was rooted in contradiction. Whereas Loos believed that functionalism *transcended* style, Adorno argued that “the absolute rejection of style becomes style”.⁶ He proposed that *purposeful* and *purpose-free* arts are intertwined in dialectic tension, and that art without purpose is, indeed, the truest form of critical art. This led to the argument that “criticism of ornament means no more than criticism of that which has lost its functional and symbolic signification”,⁷ suggesting that functionalism was, ultimately, a repurposing of the previous style.

As such, Adorno challenged the idea that functionalism's value lay in purpose. He wrote, "use – or consumption – is much more closely related to the pleasure principle than an object of artistic representation", yet "pleasure appears, according to the bourgeois work ethic, as wasted energy".⁸ If functionalist architecture was to be truly beneficial it would have to reject the idea of purpose, for projecting purpose upon a space closes off its critical potential. Adorno's crucial contradiction was that functionalism's goal of full potential through purpose was incompatible with its appreciation of artistic value. As a result, the functionalist 'style' was adopted by the culture industry and thrown into the cycle of mass-production and consumption.

The significance of Adorno's argument remains when we consider the reinterpretation of functionalism in the neoliberal age of capitalism. For while Adorno identified the rise of mass-production and consumption as in conflict with a functionalism of true value, neoliberalism introduced a vital progression that complicated the relationship further: the promise that each individual is – supposedly – in control of their own success (yet bound within a contradictory capitalist framework). We will see the full implication of this shortly, but for now we can envision the progression as such: Functionalism > consumerism for *pleasure* > consumerism for *purpose*.

Of course, the neoliberal cityscape is vast and, as I do not intend to analyse it as a whole, let us use the phenomenon of the micro-city to exemplify. Described as spaces for "high-density living with diverse mixed-use functionalities, revolutionizing urban living within the broader context of existing cities",⁹ such a complex seeks to provide all the necessary components for any inhabitant to thrive in several aspects. Features of micro-cities can include courtyards, cafés, gyms, spas, resembling an everyday all-inclusive resort. We must ask: if the city contains all of these spaces, why contain them again in a separate entity? In an endless desire to push functionality further, certain trends in modern architecture have essentially recreated and commodified the city itself within the confines of an apartment block.

But, dialectically speaking, are micro-cities functional utopias designed for success? There exists an irony in the creation of a city within a city, for the architect must reject the wider city they seek to recreate. As such, the inhabitant of the micro-city is cut off from the outside, the same city that promises to provide the neoliberal soul with the nourishment it needs to thrive. If the micro-city claims that what exists within itself is more than sufficient for the inhabitant and the remainder of the city is 'excess', where does the modern city draw the line of what is indeed functional within its landscape?

This is not limited to the micro-city: spaces built and marketed for self-improvement or success are all uses of contemporary functional architecture. Without being exhaustive, the office, the burgeoning co-working market, and the health and wellbeing centre all deliver a purpose in line with the neoliberal dream of hard work and self-empowerment. But while they are marketed as spaces for individual success, who are they really serving? As Fredric Jameson stated, “[o]f all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship”.¹⁰ Indeed, these spaces are also commodities. The cycle repeats: another consumable style becomes the dominant mode under the guise of purpose.

Let us here return to Aalto, whose unique humanist approach recognised the threat facing functional architecture’s value (and I return the reader’s attention to the opening quote). Aalto sits on the modernist timeline after “its pioneers had already established a zero degree functionalism against which he could react in humanist and organic terms”.¹¹ He understood that functionalism’s value lay not in the absolute rejection of ornament, or even in a building’s specific purpose, but in the details that transform a space into a sanctuary of undisturbed, intentional dwelling. We could speculate that he would not have minded if a gym was used as a gym as intended or not, so long as the architecture itself bridged the gap between the self and the natural world; only then would the inhabitant have access to a truly valuable environment. As such, did he claim that “a window without a shutter was like an eye without an eyelid”,¹² for he considered architecture as an expansion of the self.

We find ourselves, then, at the heart of a tension between design and economics. I do not intend to suggest that contemporary architecture cannot appear beautiful, or that it is inherently dysfunctional. Rather, the growth of spaces where function is applied *to* its architecture, rather than within the architecture itself, negates the nuances that designers like Aalto advocated for. The ‘inner value’ he referred to exists not in an enforced purpose, but the careful combination of light, air, and intentional materials into a space that becomes truly beautiful in the Adornian sense. Each of Aalto’s projects was uniquely designed in line with his vision that an urban environment should not be homogenous or symmetrical, but as fragmented and layered as the organic ground he found solace in.

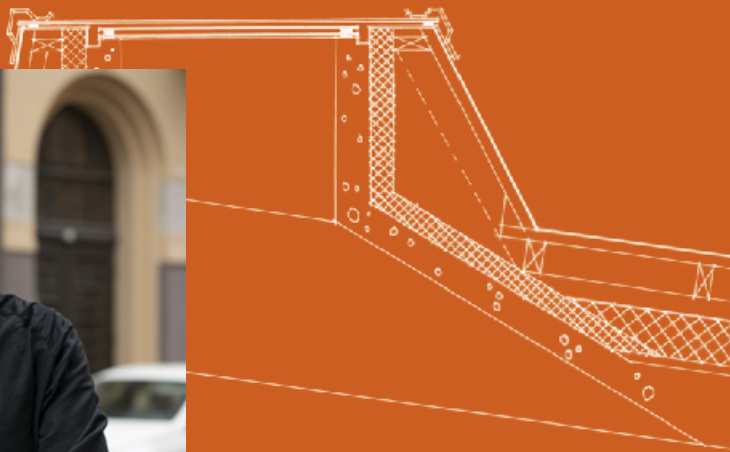
And so, to offer a final glimmer of hope, in Aalto, and indeed Adorno, something resembling redemption might be found when we remember that architecture is an art in itself. ‘Use’ need only be useful to oneself (even if it appears otherwise useless) and a city of excellent architecture should reflect the uniqueness of its citizens. If we remove – as much as possible – the non-critical, commodifying law of the culture

industry, we could imagine an environment which offers something of the potential Adorno saw in true art, or that Aalto saw in the harmonious potential of urban living. After all, a miniature city without the disjointed excess of the wider city, existing only as a container for the inhabitant's unique pleasure, could certainly offer the sublime potential to create and enjoy one's own meaning.

Endnotes

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C o n c e p t s



Esa Ruskeepää

Esa Ruskeepää is a Helsinki-based architect and lecturer at Aalto University, where he teaches building design with a focus on public architecture. He runs his own practice, Arkkitehtitoimisto Esa Ruskeepää Oy, in Helsinki. For Ruskeepää, architecture is a living language—and studying cities and buildings is a way of understanding the people who made them. In his view, architecture has always been shaped by technology, culture, and money. He is particularly interested in why great cities are so hard to build today, and what it would take for us to think in centuries again.

MONEY'S WORTH

Esa Ruskeepää

Introduction

This paper examines the Rautatalo office building, constructed in Helsinki, Finland, between 1953 and 1955 and designed by architect Alvar Aalto. Commissioned by a conglomerate of Finnish industry associations as their new headquarters, the building's material standards and craftsmanship clearly exceed what is feasible in contemporary construction. The quality reflects a fundamentally different economic calculus. Understanding our current monetary system—and specifically, inflation—will help to explain this. When money loses value, we are increasingly forced to prioritize the immediate present over the future. This in turn impacts the ability or motivation to create enduring things, like architecture.

Two basic economic concepts inform this analysis: productivity and inflation.

Productivity

Productivity in an economy can be expressed through gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which measures the average economic output per person. While institutional quality (e.g., corruption) and availability of natural resources affect GDP per capita, it is primarily driven by technological progress. Combined with market incentives, technological progress reliably reduces the cost of products and services over time. When productivity improves, the average standard of living rises.

Inflation

Inflation, on the other hand, makes everything more expensive. Inflation can result from supply shocks such as natural disasters, military conflicts, and trade restrictions, or market distortions such as monopolies, government policies, price controls, wage controls, and excessive regulation. However, the primary driver of persistently rising prices is the nature of the fiat monetary systems. These systems grant central banks the capacity to expand the money supply at discretion and without any inherent constraints. Originally conceived for national emergencies, fiat systems have been systematically exploited ever since their inception for short-term political gains.

Fiat systems became widely adopted during World War I when governments across Europe suspended the gold standard to finance war expenditures through inflation

rather than taxation.¹ This mechanism allowed them to wage “total war” by tapping into the accumulated wealth of the nation as a whole.

The interwar period was marked by financial instability. In the Weimar Republic, hyperinflation—driven by war reparations and reckless money printing—peaked in 1923. It rendered the currency worthless and devastated the middle class.² The Wall Street crash of 1929 triggered cascading bank failures and plunged the world into the Great Depression that persisted throughout the 1930s, causing economic hardship and political instability.³ Soon after, World War II brought another round of inflationary wartime spending.

Post-war attempts to restore the gold standard mostly failed. The final break came in 1971, when President Richard Nixon ended the dollar’s convertibility to gold—the “Nixon Shock.”⁴ Since then, all major currencies have been fiat. Central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), such as the digital euro, represent the latest evolution in the implementation of fiat monetary systems—providing a digital form of central bank-issued fiat money.⁵

Proponents of fiat currency systems argue that the flexibility for active monetary and fiscal management—such as stimulus during downturns—enables stronger overall economic performance and employment, outweighing inflation. Long-term data contradicts this claim (Fig. 2). Yet the austerity required to halt currency debasement would likely prove politically impossible—entitlements would be reduced, funding for projects would be halted, and government would shrink. Even *slowing* the rate of currency debasement has proven difficult: new spending proposals usually encounter little organized opposition, while even modest cuts immediately mobilize interest groups and risk voter backlash. The result is a structural and perpetual deficit, which is effectively funded by inflation. The U.S. dollar supply, for example, has expanded under every administration since the end of the gold standard in 1971.⁶

Seventy Years of Inflation

Since the 1950s, Finland’s GDP per capita has increased more than fivefold—an extraordinary achievement in just a few decades.⁷ During the same period, however, inflation has far exceeded the commonly cited “acceptable” target of two percent annually, averaging in fact 4.3 percent.⁸ The difference between two percent and four to five percent may seem small at first, but the compounding effect over a long time period is devastating (Fig. 2). Since 1951, the cost of living in Finland has increased 23.3-fold and construction costs have risen 24.2-fold, outpacing GDP per capita growth by a factor of 4.2 to 4.4.⁹ This divergence suggests that persistently

high inflation has actually made us poorer in real terms, not richer. If inflation had indeed averaged only two percent annually since 1951, costs would have *fallen* in real terms by a factor of 0.8 (Fig. 2).

These long-term economic trajectories offer a compelling, if reductionist, answer to the question: Why don't we build the way we used to? In a fiat system, cumulative inflation makes everything more expensive until quality standards must be lowered. Eventually the reduced standard, too, becomes unaffordable.

Rautatalo and Construction Costs in the 1950s

Alvar Aalto's initial cost estimate for the Rautatalo project, as outlined in his October 24, 1951, letter to the client Hakasalmen Oy, placed the total construction budget at 380 million Finnish marks (FIM).¹³ This estimate assumed a volume of 25,000 m³ above ground (at 12,000 FIM/m³) and 10,000 m³ below ground (at 8,000 FIM/m³). In the same letter, Aalto proposed a fee of 9.6 million FIM (approximately 2.5 percent of the total budget), based on classification "III" in the standardized fee schedule (*arkkitehtitaksa*). This placed the project, as he acknowledged, only slightly above the average standard.

Meeting minutes from June 6, 1952, record a revised total estimate of 510 million FIM, including fees.¹⁴ This figure was based on a uniform rate of 12,000 FIM/m³ applied to an overall volume of 39,400 m³. The building permit application followed shortly thereafter, indicating that this estimate reflected the finalized design. A post-completion speech later cited 38,500 m³, confirming the 1952 calculation.¹⁵ Finally, the client's annual report covering January 1, 1954, to June 30, 1955, confirms that actual costs did not exceed the estimate.¹⁶

In the 1950s, construction costs in Finland were typically calculated on a volumetric basis (cubic meters), whereas modern estimates rely on gross floor area (bruttoala). The Rautatalo "as-built" drawings, dated October 17, 1955, indicate ten stories—including two basement levels—with a total gross floor area of 11,000 m², of which 3,000 m² are below grade (the round figures are coincidental).¹⁷

Construction Costs Today

Converted to 2025 euros, Rautatalo's 1952 budget of 510 million FIM equates to approximately €20.3 million.¹⁸ This translates to a construction cost of roughly €1,850 per m² (gross floor area) which is far below today's prices. Currently, new office buildings in Helsinki average around €2,950 per m².¹⁹ This gives an 11,000 m²

building a budget of €32.3 million. In other words, Aalto's client today could afford only about a 7,000 m² project.

This inflation-adjusted comparison alone, however, does not fully account for the disparity. Even a good budget today cannot accommodate the quality and craftsmanship of Aalto's work—cast bronze door handles, natural stone finishes, and so on. Furthermore, paperwork and regulatory compliance required in construction has increased substantially since the 1950s, diverting a growing share of the budget to process, instead of the actual building.

To estimate what a project of Rautatalo's size *and* quality would cost today, we can multiply Aalto's budget by the 4.4 productivity-inflation divergence factor (Fig. 2). Based on this estimate, the cost today would be about €89.3 million, or approximately €8,100 per m² (gross floor area).

Unable to accommodate rising costs by building *less*, our only available option is to build *worse*.

Endnotes

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Figures



1. Rautatalo (Alvar Aalto, 1955). Cast bronze door handle.
Metalli- ja taideteostenvälimo (Pakilan Valimo).
Photo © Heikki Havas (1955). Alvar Aalto Foundation.

2. Finland 1860–2025. Real GDP per capita, nominal cost of living, and construction cost indices (1951:10=100).
Data source: Statistics Finland.

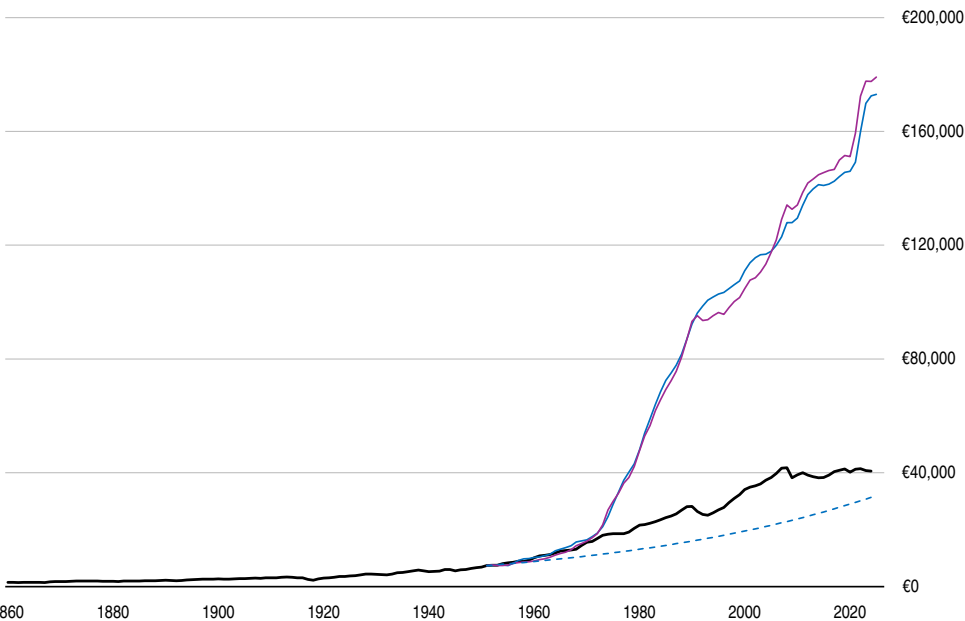


Figure 1. Finland 1860–2025. Real GDP per capita, nominal cost of living, and construction cost indices (1951:10=100).
Data source: Statistics Finland.

- Real GDP per capita in Finland (1860–)^{1, 2}
- Nominal cost of living in Finland (1951–)³
- Nominal cost of construction in Finland (1951–)⁴
- - - Nominal cost of living in Finland assuming 2 % annual inflation (1951–)

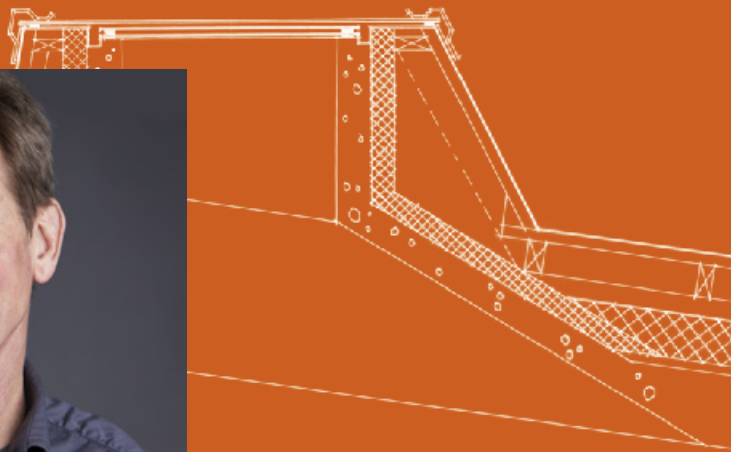
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C o n c e p t s



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Christian Volkmann is an Associate Professor at the Spitzer School of Architecture, City College of New York (CCNY), USA. His teaching focuses on *Design* and *Technology*, functioning as essential elements of comprehensive design thinking. He is thus dedicated to tasks of connecting between both curricular areas through tangible Design+Build projects. The main perspective is to develop new pedagogic concepts affecting skill sets crucial to emerging architects and therefore influential on how architecture is commonly practiced, emphasizing the making of an artefact. He is a licensed architect in New York, originally educated in Germany (TU Berlin) and Switzerland (ETH Zürich). He is the principal of the New York City based firm of *aardvarchitecture*, focused also on Design-Build implementation, specifically on resolving and integrating the detail architecturally, engaging the motivation of craft with skills of fabrication and meaningful production. He has worked in his career, among others, for Josef Paul Kleihues (Berlin), Mario Campi & Franco Pesina (Lugano) and Annabelle Selldorf (New York).

AALTO'S DETAIL, AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN-BUILD EDUCATION

Christian Volkmann

*Nearly every design task involves tens, often hundreds, sometimes thousands of different contradictory elements, which are forced into a functional harmony only by man's will. This harmony cannot be achieved by any other means than those of art. (Alvar Aalto)*¹

Introduction

Alvar Aalto often utilizes juxtaposition to define his cultural standpoints in architecture. Sigfried Giedion supported Aalto's departure from the direct functionality of modernism to include qualities such as mood, atmosphere and national characteristics,² while Manfredo Tafuri argues that "with Aalto we are outside of the great themes ... The qualities of his works have a meaning only as masterful distractions, not subject to reproduction outside the remote reality, in which they have their roots."³

Aalto welcomes the common conflict between generic functionality and the individualistic experimentation with material and the resulting project-specific detailing. He invents the special term of "flexible standardization"⁴ in order to connect the two issues and to position himself. He uses that term to ensure that architecture nurtures "character",⁵ "variety and richness".⁶

Aalto's architectural detail

The details in Aalto's architecture are eye-catching: They are thoughtful and sophisticated, crafty and inventive. They often describe the particular way they were assembled. They bear a material language, which relates to a Semperian method, where certain material properties refer to the way the material is expressed. Details connect to one another, and to intrinsic material properties (Fig.1). A distinct material curiosity is apparent, relating its nature to architecture, thus defining the job of the architect as a material inventor. Aalto describes this relationship as follows:

"In the olden days ... when methods for treating materials were few or non-existent, nature itself, the only supplier of building materials, restricted the available methods of construction. Architecture ... could well be called the fruit of the genius of discovery ... of fitting them together in the best possible way. ... we can safely speak of a

unilateral, immediate influence of materials and methods on architecture ... with the advance of progress, however, the chain of cause and effect is no longer so easy to establish. Actual pieces of nature give way to building materials, which no longer form an original, undeveloped group, but are subject to an ever-changing remodeling that is and continues to be generated within the architectural process itself.”⁷

Aalto recognizes an essential connection between material invention and architectural expression. He puts responsibility on architects to control *processes of making*, in a design-related way. How does he respond to this challenge in practice?

Aalto approaches this in the most hands-on way, for instance while experimenting with laminated wood. Research has initially nothing to do with “reproduction”, but focuses on instinctive individual moves in order to discover material essence and thus reconnect to nature. This can be demonstrated at the wood relief studies undertaken between 1929 and 1933, which were later exhibited in London (Fig.2). Aalto quotes a review in *The Times*: “... [the critic] classified some works, however, as pure units of abstract art, which ... might link up with some practical use in the future. He may well have been right. ... But I would like to add as my personal emotional view that architecture and its details are in some way all part of biology.”⁸ Are the details indeed part of biology or is Aalto’s way of practice what connects them to biology?

As a practitioner, it seems logical that architecture develops its language intrinsically. More fascinating here is how material research is involved in Aalto’s architectural development. The wonder of architecture is connected to experience, to the individual, transforming material into architecture. Aalto describes it as the wonder of standing before the Christmas tree.⁹ After such wonder is discovered, the connection to *means-and-methods*, to professional fabricators (such as Otto Korhonen) and to more rationalized construction is established step by step.

Today’s architectural detail

How about the “great themes” that Tafuri seems to favor? We should look at present conditions, fifty years after Tafuri’s observation: we are at a point in our culture characterized by fatigue towards standardized features of streamlined industrialization and mass-fabrication, often serving primarily economic objectives. In counter-reaction, we witness that “artisanal” qualities are again appreciated (i.e. in the food sector, in furniture design, etc.). This speaks to our longing for experiencing authenticity. We are curious about unique artifacts.

In typical architectural production, the usage of industrial building materials leads to predictable, often monotonous outcomes. Architectural expression is suppressed in favor of repetitive solutions with efficient turn-around. An example from New York (Fig.3): residential construction at Manhattan's Westside, where several blocks were "developed" in the early 2000's. The facades are based on standardized details, dictating dimensions of products, without any architectural ambition of material investigation, or sense of *nuance* or individuality. The buildings therefore look much the same. The articulation of architectural detail, which Aalto so masterful practiced, has suffered. The relation to biology has vanished. Architects become *specifiers* of products rather than controlling a specific process of a tangible language.

The architect's material experimentation has given way to something *food-sector related*: architectural "fast food". With the lack of nuance, there cannot be architecture as Aalto understood it. The detail is instrumental for "applied art": It inspires and provides "harmony"¹⁰ for the artifact.

Aalto's position of promoting "flexible standardization" is instrumental: instead of "standardization with a centralizing tendency,"¹¹ which Aalto attributes as justified for car manufacturing, for quality in architecture an approach is needed that focuses on developing materiality to fit multiple needs, for instance calibrating the site to optimize the experience of nature, and thus, even broader, optimize humanity. Aalto remarks that "nature is the most remarkable standardization institute of all."¹² Decentralized standardization is based on discovering nature. Architects must study "nature's unlimited capacity to produce variation."¹³

Why does Aalto (without any apparent origin) engage in such hands-on research and material experimentation? Was this the *Zeitgeist* of the 30s? Was there anything engrained in his own education so influential? He was fascinated by his friend László Moholy-Nagy's book *Von Material zu Architektur*,¹⁴ which might have influenced this agenda. But the true origin is not clear, even though the Bauhaus's education model was famous at the time.

Was architecture understood as an *applied art*? Here "reinterpretation", the conference's topic, is of the essence: we must realize that an architectural detail always is a precious asset. It is communicative, it is related to how we see nature and how we experience with all five senses. To reinvigorate its culture is essential. Without it, architecture looks monotonous and reproductive, without a fair chance as being recognized as *applied art*.

Engaging students of architecture in material experimentation is thus significant. The curriculum has to adjust: material invention grows through haptic experience and “sensory exercises”.¹⁵ Architect-driven “Design+Build” projects are likely the future of Architecture, because they allow sophisticated applied material deployment. Aalto’s perspectives on both “experimentation” and “standardization” are of utmost relevance to develop parameters. Aalto’s particular appeal lies in the combination of the two topics.

Design–Build Curriculum

In my design-build courses, called “Artefactory Lab”,¹⁶ we explore aesthetic and technical potential in synthetic tangible experimentation, with the goal to produce true artifacts. Significant factors are:

- Differentiate (in terms of standardization) between *centralized* detail and *flexible* detail
- Engage in hands-on activities embedded in the process, developing architecture from a material perspective
- Develop know-how by involving professional fabricators into form-finding

The recent 2025 project (Fig.4), was realized in collaboration with union bricklayers. The project is dependent on custom moulds as part of its unique wall assembly production.

Important pedagogic outcomes:

- Understand the architect’s profile as material inventor, capable of leading material expression
- Establish a haptic relationship between *process* and *product*
- Establish connections between art and architecture and express such strategies in the “making”

Conclusions

Aalto shows surprising foresight related to conditions impacted by industrialization. His passion for material experimentation serves as a counterreaction, based on the belief that architects must be material inventors. His own experimentation on laminated wood had a creative impact on an array of projects throughout the decades, always interpreting different specific cases (Fig.5).

His approach could be pathbreaking in architectural education: to learn how to develop tangible *nuance*, related to applied art. The architectural detail is instrumental as a communicator of sensory belonging.

We, as architects, must reconnect to the world of craft, contributing to original expression by doing our own haptic experiments and sensitive exercises and subsequently find paths to meaningful fabrication. This could be based on Aalto's philosophy of "flexible standardization".

To cultivate the detail, especially in education, could have an immense impact on rearticulating architecture as an applied art. It would counteract tendencies of reproduction, and instead reintroduce true materiality to architecture. In this respect, it is more important how to enjoy architecture in real-time, experientially, that is, than being focused on theory. The analysis of Aalto's process could serve as a catalyst for emerging design-build curricula, relating the world of *making* to applied art.

Endnotes

- 1 Göran Schildt (ed.), *Sketches – Alvar Aalto*. Transl. Stuart Wrede, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1978), 127–128
- 2 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 2nd edition (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 137
- 3 Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (Milan: Electa Publishing, 1976), 338
- 4 Alvar Aalto, "The Humanizing of Architecture", *The Technology Review*, Vol. 43, No.1 (1940), 14–16.
- 5 "I think that we here, as architects, should refuse to be slaves and to accept everything that the factories turn out. It is our profession and our job to direct standardization, to give it character, so that we can really make buildings that fit people and places." Alvar Aalto, "Speech in Mexico City 1963", reproduced in Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*. Transl. Timothy Binham (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 140:
- 6 "The purpose of architectural standardization is thus not to produce types, but instead to create variety and richness which could, in the ideal case, be compared with nature's unlimited capacity to produce variation." Alvar Aalto, "The Reconstruction of Europe is the key problem for the Architecture of our Time", *Arkkitehti* 5/1941, reproduced in Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, 154.
- 7 Alvar Aalto, "Influence of Structure and Material on Contemporary Architecture", lecture 1938, reproduced in Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, 98.
- 8 Alvar Aalto, "The Trout and the Stream", *Domus*, 1948, 7–11, reproduced in Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, 108.
- 9 "I cannot think of a better example of a natural encounter between the world of beauty and man than the child who stands in front of a Christmas tree with sparkling eyes and open mouth and admires the red, blue and gold baubles." Alvar Aalto, "Abbé Coignard's Sermon", *Uusi Aura*, January 1, 1928. Reproduced in Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own words*, 57.
- 10 "Of course, architecture uses technology, but it does so by applying various technologies simultaneously, and its principal goal is to bring these technologies into harmony." Alvar Aalto, "The Reconstruction of Europe", 154.
- 11 "This process could be called standardization with a centralizing tendency." Alvar Aalto, *ibid.*, 153.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision - From Material to Architecture*. Transl. Daphne Hoffmann (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2021, German original 1929).
- 15 László Moholy-Nagy on sensory exercises: "...primitive exercises were, for example, the first steps in the basic teachings, but the further goal was: the experiential understanding of the material,

which was never achieved through book learning in normal school operations or in traditional lessons." Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 19.

- 16 "spitzerschool_ccny", Instagram account, Spitzer School of Architecture: Architectural Research Studio: "Artefactory Lab": Undergraduate level, taught by Associate Prof. Christian Volkmann and Adjunct Prof. Steve Preston; Several entries in 2025: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DFVmlv2OIC8/>; <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ96Y5fOXXS/?igsh=eHZqNXZmNzRmMzZl>; <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ96Y5fOXXS/?igsh=eHZqNXZmNzRmMzZl>

Figures



1. The attraction to Alvar Aalto's details.

- A.1: Jyväskylä University, handrail detail © by author;
 A.2: Säynätsalo Town Hall, door pull detail © Jonas Forth;
 A.3: Säynätsalo Town Hall, butterfly truss detail © Jonas Forth;
 A.4: Helsinki House of Culture, Façade Detail © Maija Holma, Alvar Aalto Foundation

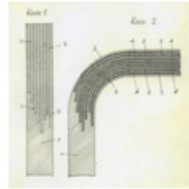
2. Alvar Aalto's concept of designing supported by the act of making.

- B.1: Wood relief for the Exhibition of Finnish Furniture, Fortnum & Mason, London 1933
 © Harry Charrington;
 B.2: Alvar Aalto, Patent 18666; A way of bending wood and objects manufactured in this way
 © Alvar Aalto Foundation;
 B.3: Hand bending L-legs at the factory in the 1930s; Alvar Aalto Museum
 © Mauno Mannelin, Artek Collection/Alvar Aalto Foundation;
 B.4: A detail of L-leg; Alvar Aalto Museum;
 © Markku Alatalo, Artek Collection/Alvar Aalto Foundation

3. Our reality: Standardized industrial reproduction in architecture; Riverside Boulevard, New York.

- C.1, C.2, C.3, C.4: Riverside Boulevard: industrial reproduction in architecture, New York City,
 2025 © by author

2



B.2



B.3



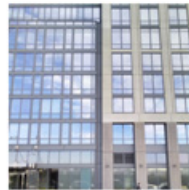
B.1

B.4

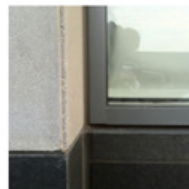
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C.2



C.3



C.1

C.4

4



D.2



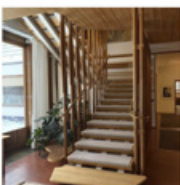
D.3



D.1

D.4

5



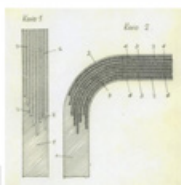
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E.2



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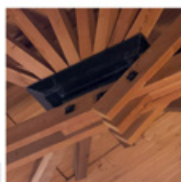
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E.6



E.7



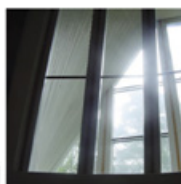
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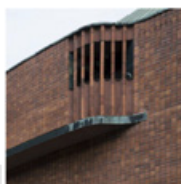
E.9



E.10



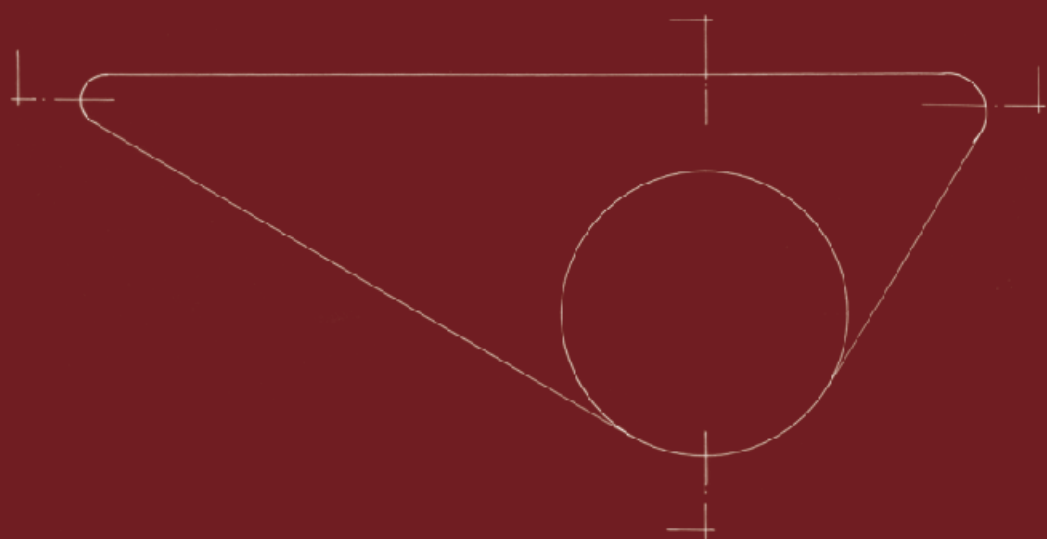
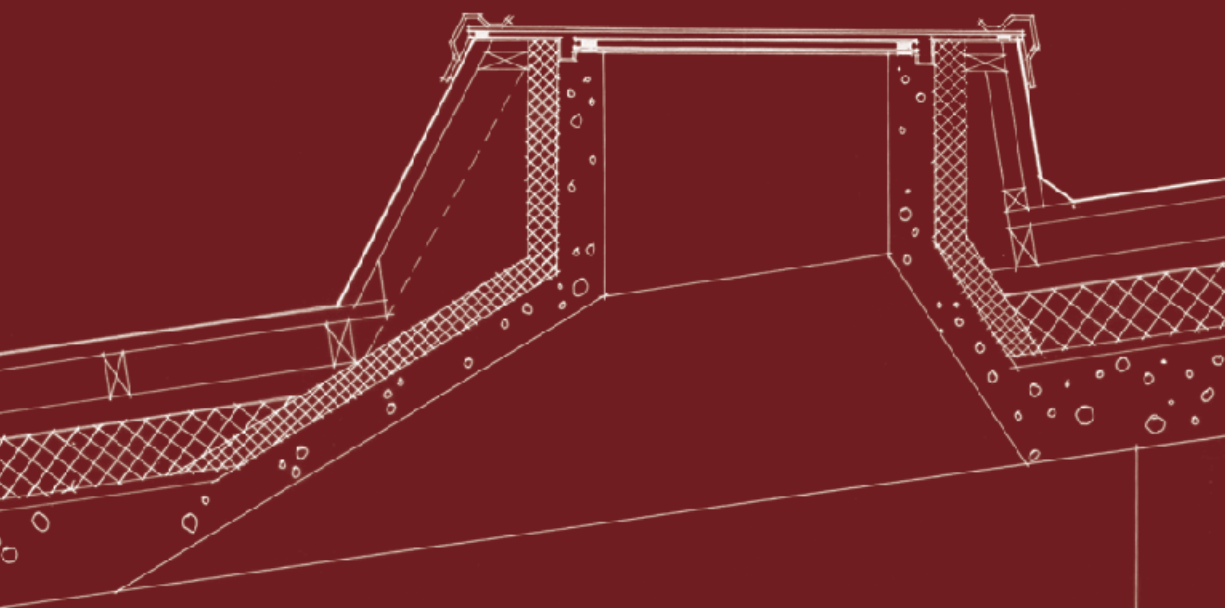
E.11



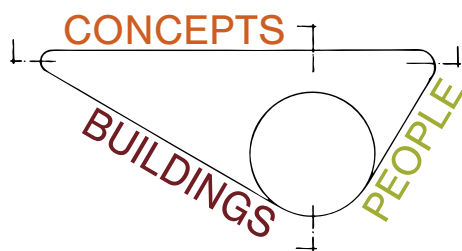
E.12

4. Reinterpretation of standardization in education: the act of making; Artefactory Lab (CCNY) 2025.
D.1: Artefactory Lab: Construction phase; City College of New York, Spitzer School of Architecture 2025 © by author;
D.2, D.3: Breezeblock fabrication in studio, Artefactory Lab 2025, Spitzer School of Architecture © Rustam Domullojonov
D.4: Finished assembly; Artefactory Lab 2025, Spitzer School of Architecture © Fion Li

5. The influence of Alvar Aalto's act of making on the logic of multiple projects and details.
E.1: Villa Mairea stair © Jonas Forth; E.2: Aalto Theater Essen, Germany: side wall © by author; E.3: (see B.4);
E.4: (see B.2); E.5: Alvar Aalto highback chair, R&K Forsblom, Detail © Auctionet.com/Stockholm Auktionsverk Helsinki;
E.6: (see A.2); E.7: (see B.1); E.8: (see A.3); E.9: (see A.1); E.10: Alvar Aalto Armchair No.31, Detail © Auctionet.com/Stockholm Auktionsverk Helsinki; E.1: Church of the Three Crosses Imatra, window detail © by author; E.12: (see A.4)

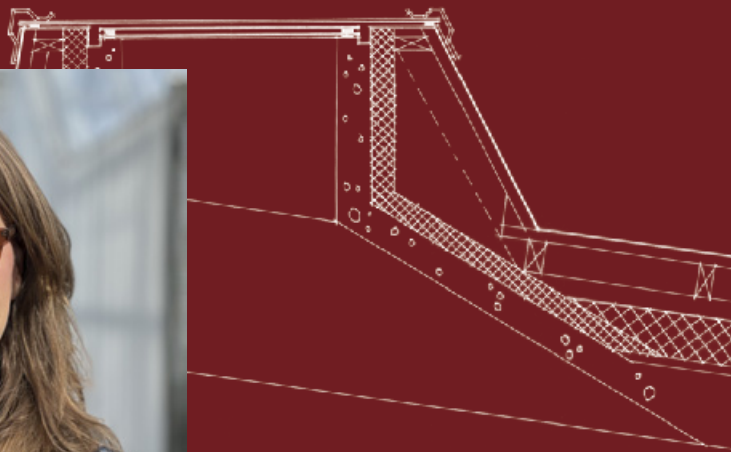


B u i l d i n g s



RE
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PRETATION

B u i l d i n g s



Henriette Steiner

Henriette Steiner holds a PhD in Architecture from the University of Cambridge and is Professor in the Section for Landscape and Planning – Society at the University of Copenhagen where she currently serves as Head of Section.

Her research is on the history and philosophy of architecture. Recent books include *Tower to Tower* (with Kristin Veel, MIT Press, 2020), *Touch in the Time of Corona* (with Kristin Veel, De Gruyter, 2021), and *Untold Stories – Women Gender and Architecture in Denmark* (with Jannie Bendsen and Svava Riesto, Strandberg Publishing, 2023).

She is a recent recipient of a Monography Fellowship of the Carlsberg Foundation and together with Svava Riesto, she is currently co-PI of two research projects: *Stories from Sofiegården: Alternative Forms of Living in Copenhagen as Cultural Heritage* (funded by Augustinus Foundation) and *Learning from Collaboration – Building Future Practice* (funded by the philanthropic association Realdania).

WHEN EVA AND NILS KOPPEL MET ALVAR AND AINO AALTO

HOW ARCHITECTURE COMES INTO BEING THROUGH COLLABORATIONS ACROSS BORDERS, GENDERS, GENERATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Henriette Steiner

That made it so much easier for me, because I found out that I shouldn't finish off all the technical details, because I had understood that they wanted the design to be inspired by Aalto with a row of columns or something different, and then there was no reason to begin to think about how the columns would be organized.¹

This is a quotation from a recent oral history interview drawing on the memories of a then young engineer, Sten Langvad (b. 1941), who describes an episode during the time he worked on the construction of the new campus for the Danish Technological University north of Copenhagen in the mid 1960s. It was a huge campus development, the design of which was led by the joint architectural practice of Danish architects Eva Koppel (1916-2006) and Nils Koppel (1914-2009). Langvad describes how, in his role as engineer on the project, collaborating with the architects could feel somewhat stifling. In particular, Eva Koppel, he recalls, radiated an awe-inspiring authority. Yet, he later reflects that his own communication with the architects' office was aided by his social background with friends and his brother being architects. These private connections gave Langvad a good understanding of the *modus operandi* of architects at a time of rapid change in the building sector with the turn to industrialized building methods and a building boom in Denmark. Langvad ensured to keep an openness in the engineer's work process so as to allow the architects as much aesthetic freedom as possible, stretching even into the construction phase. And so much so that Eva and Nils Koppel could explore the above-mentioned somewhat undefined aesthetic references to Alvar Aalto's work. The value of such often tacit collaborations between people with different professional identities in the building sector has only been little researched as a driver of what makes the built environment come into being, although we must assume that these collaborations play a crucial role, not least in periods of change where wholly new aesthetic and spatial forms of work become possible due to technological innovation.²

The mentioning of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) here is not accidental. Eva and Nils Koppel both spent formative years as part of the large group of Danish Jewish and

political refugees in Sweden during the Second World War.³ They worked on some of Alvar Aalto's Swedish projects of the time, a rare opportunity for architects in an otherwise war-ridden Europe where cities were destroyed, or at best where construction was stalled. But the couple's attraction to Alvar Aalto's work, whom British architecture and cultural writer Owen Hatherley names the only 'star' architect of the Nordic countries come the post-war period,⁴ had begun much earlier. Indeed, already as architecture students in the 1930s, Nils and Eva Koppel – like many other architects from the Nordic countries and beyond – looked to Alvar Aalto's practice. With much ado, however, the two young Danish architects both ended up working for Alvar Aalto already in the 1930s.⁵ Eva and Nils Koppel's relationship with Alvar Aalto was thus a working relationship spanning several decades, and it was one which we may assume – despite the clear hierarchy and difference in age, seniority, gender in the case of Eva, and nationality – would have entailed an aspect of mutuality, of collaboration across these differences and hierarchies.

Indeed, as Eva and Nils Koppel later tell the story, it was during the spring of 1937 that Nils set off to scout for work in Alvar Aalto's practice in Helsinki both for himself and his newly-wed wife, Eva. Still students at the time, they set out to do what was not uncommon for up-and-coming Danish architects at the time: they broke off their architectural education towards the end of their studies to work for a semester or two before finalizing their education. Some other students also went abroad but the couple had set their eyes on Alvar Aalto in Finland. In particular, it was Aalto's widely published sanatorium in Paimio (completed 1935) which had enthralled the couple, and Eva and Nils Koppel had thus written several letters to Alvar Aalto but never received a response.⁶ Undeterred by this obstacle, Nils Koppel travelled to Helsinki and immediately went to Aalto's villa and studio in Munkkiniemi in Helsinki. As he knocked on the door to the studio, he was met by a sleepy architect and peeked into a room that was marked by the previous night's celebration of the studio's victory in the design competition for the Finnish pavilion for the upcoming World's Fair in New York which would take place two years later. Yet, Alvar Aalto himself was nowhere to be seen.

As feminist histories of architecture have established, the work of 'star' architects, many of whom are men and portrayed in a heroic individualistic light, was never done in isolation, but rather through multifaceted forms of collaboration.⁷ Even if Alvar Aalto may be considered *the* modernist star architect of the Nordic countries, and if that stardom was founded in the 1930s with projects like the sanatorium in Paimio and the Finnish pavilion for the World's Fair, Alvar Aalto did not achieve this fame all by himself. Needless to say, the incredibly productive work of the studio was accomplished together with many employees and collaborators, and in par-

ticular Alvar Aalto's wives, Aino Aalto (1904-1994) and Elissa Aalto (1922-1994), were among his most intimate collaborators.⁸ Yet, whilst Eva and Nils Koppel later built their hugely successful Danish architectural practice in equal partnership as co-owners of their studio and who were equally credited for their shared work,⁹ it took decades for not least Aino's contribution to be recognised, let alone foregrounded.¹⁰ Indeed, as an inherently collaborative discipline, neither of these successful architects worked in isolation – they were immersed in vast and complex collaborative networks spanning the most intimate sphere, where creative work and business seeped into the couple's most private lives as much as it encompassed numerous and ever-evolving collaborations with other architects, clients, builders, politicians, town planners, landscape architects, interior designers, other experts, users and many others. This would not least have been the case in a period of great technological transformation of the building sector with engineers, such as the example above of Steen Langvad.

Indeed, even in the recently conducted interview cited above, Langvad emphatically and with great sensitivity recognises the desire for Eva and Nils Koppel to lean into what they had aspired to many years previously when they had sought to work in Aalto's practice as young architecture students. For Nils and Eva Koppel's wish to learn from Aalto at first hand did not end with a peek into a nearly empty, messy studio on the morning after the party celebrating Alvar and Aino Aalto and the studio's big win back in 1937. Nils Koppel was told that morning in 1937 that Alvar Aalto was still sleeping but that he could come back later in the day. When he did, he had a quick chat with Alvar Aalto which only confirmed his desire to work for the studio.¹¹ Yet, Alvar and Aino Aalto were on their way to New York to prepare the work on the pavilion, so Nils Koppel was told that he could come back for another chat two weeks later once the couple was back. Just like in a fairy tale, this message of a two-week-long postponement of the much-sought-for follow-up chat with Alvar Aalto allegedly repeated itself three times, Nils and Eva Koppel later recall.¹² Yet, the short personal interaction had left Nils Koppel no less determined to work for the studio, so much so that he told Eva to join him in Helsinki and managed to organise work for them in other Helsinki-based studios while they were trying to engineer an opportunity to work for Alvar Aalto's studio.

The third time Nils Koppel visited the studio, he did so with the advice from a Finnish architect Ollo Pöyry, who had told him to simply sit down at one of the desks in the studio and wait, preferably late at night where Alvar Aalto himself would oftentimes be in the studio in person. And so he hid. One late evening as Nils Koppel visited the studio, no one was home, and just one architect, an American, was working that night. But then something happened. Alvar Aalto himself walked through the studio

late at night saying something along the lines that ‘Oh, great that you are here. I need a perspective drawing by tomorrow morning, can you do that?’¹³ Nils Koppel, then a roughly 23-year-old architecture student, worked all night, producing what he himself later describes as a quite boring drawing. The next morning Alvar Aalto returned, surprised to see that Nils Koppel was ‘already there’, and with a few pencil lines spruced up the drawing and hired Nils and later Eva Koppel to work for the studio, a relationship that would last such that they would later return to work for the studio in Stockholm during the Second World War.¹⁴

While this story of the persistent, young, hard-working architect with the grit and privilege to move from Copenhagen to Helsinki, settle down for weeks and spend an all-nighter in the studio working on the boring details before Alvar Aalto himself – as the inspirational senior architect and creative fixed point of the studio – finishes the job of course is a story that entails an aspirational morale. It also is one that glosses over differences of class, gender and ability, which made such risk-taking possible. And it has a happy ending, something which many other aspiring architects of the same generation as Koppel would have hoped for in vain. Yet, what the story also emphasises is that the outcome of the toils of that night, that very drawing, was a product which neither belonged to Nils Koppel nor to Alvar Aalto all on their own. It was a collaboration. And while it is less well-known what Eva Koppel contributed during her time in Helsinki, we know that Nils Koppel made a traceable contribution, for example, to the staircase of the well-known Villa Mairea.

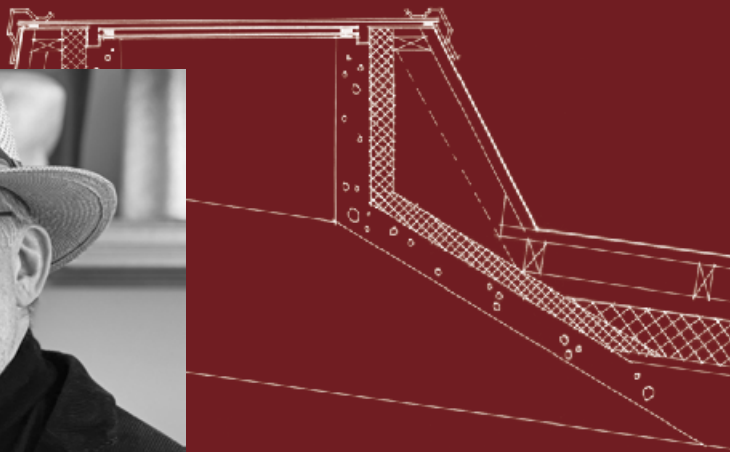
Villa Mairea, a work of rare aesthetic and economic freedom bestowed on the architect by a super-wealthy client, helped sediment Alvar Aalto’s status internationally as a ‘star’.¹⁵ One of Nils Koppel’s contributions was to work out the unordered system of the vertical sleeper-like wooden structure, from the well-known images of the villa’s interior.¹⁶ It was a job that required much deliberation on behalf of the architect to get just that right balance between symmetry and haphazardness. Drawings from the archive are marked with Nils Koppel’s initials and thus are a concrete example of his contribution to the collaborative fabric of the studio’s work. Rather than ‘taking something’ from Alvar Aalto and his studio’s contribution to architecture and as an inspiration for numerous architects and others across decades and continents, this is a reminder that any piece of architecture, whether done by ‘stars’ or not, is the product of numerous collaborations. And as this story also shows, these are collaborations that straddle not just professional identities and contributions like the engineer Sten Langvad and the architects Eva and Nils Koppel, but also gender – as in the examples of Alvar and Aino Aalto as much as Eva and Nils Koppel – age – such as the story of Alvar Aalto and Nils Koppel suggests – as much as borders

and stories of migration by will or force – as shown by the two instances of how Eva and Nils Koppel from Copenhagen came to work in Helsinki and Stockholm.

Endnotes

- 1 Oral history interview with engineer Sten Langvad by Svava Riesto, Henriette Steiner and Laila Zwisler at the Technical University of Denmark's campus, 22 May 2025. Original transcript is available upon request.
- 2 With a focus on the building boom period in Denmark in the 1960s, this collaborative scaffolding of architecture is something we explore in the architectural historical research project *Learning from Collaboration – Building Future Practice*, a research project which I co-lead with Svava Riesto and which involves historians of architecture, planning and engineering across five Danish architectural research institutions. The research project has been funded by the philanthropic association Realdania, see: https://ign.ku.dk/english/learning-from-collaboration_english/.
- 3 Eva og Nils Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende hos Alvar Aalto', in *Tiden i Stockholm*, ed. Finn Monies and Karen Zahle, Skive: Arkitektens Forlag, 1999, pp. 62-77.
- 4 Owen Hatherley, 'In Surrey Quays', *London Review of Books*, 46(3), 8 February 2024.
- 5 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', p. 64.
- 6 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', p. 64.
- 7 Despina Stratigakos, *Where Are the Women Architects?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. See also my work as co-leader of the research project Women in Danish Architecture 1925-75, www.womenindanisharchitecture.dk, including the co-written book: Jannie Rosenberg Bendsen, Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner, *Ufortalte Historier om Kvinder i Dansk Arkitektur/ Untold Stories of Women in Danish Architecture* (Danish and English editions). Copenhagen: Strandberg Publishing, 2023.
- 8 Heikki Aalto-Alanen, *Aino + Alvar Aalto: A Life Together*, London: Phaidon, 2023
- 9 For an overview of Eva and Nils Koppel's work, see Johannes Heddal Hansen and Jennifer Dahm Petersen, *Eva og Nils Koppel*, Copenhagen: Strandberg Publishing, 2017. The intricacies, opportunities and inequities of examples of the many architectural partnerships in both private and professional lives of Danish architects of the same generation of architects as Eva and Nils Koppel has been discussed in Henriette Steiner, 'Between Passion and Possession: Women Architects and the Houses They Built for Family, Love and Work', *Journal of Architecture* 28(3): 327-353, 2023, as well as in Bendsen, Riesto and Steiner, *Untold Stories*.
- 10 Myriam López-Rodero, 'Women Architects in the Shadow: Aino Marsio-Aalto', *Momowo*, 2017, pp. 305-318; Alanen, *Aino + Alvar Aalto*.
- 11 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', pp. 64-66.
- 12 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', p. 67.
- 13 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', p. 67.
- 14 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', pp. 73-4
- 15 Heddal Hansen and Dahm Petersen, *Eva og Nils Koppel*, pp. 14-15.
- 16 Koppel and Koppel, 'Arkitektstuderende', pp. 72-3.

B u i l d i n g s



Leif Høgfelt Hansen

Leif Høgfelt Hansen was appointed in 2007 as a research associate professor at the Aarhus School of Architecture, Denmark. His general research focuses on Asian and Scandinavian architecture. Currently, his teaching and research angle is on adaptive reuse. He has been published in international books and journals and participated in international exhibitions, such as Milan Design Week in Italy, the Busan Biennale, the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, and the Gwangju Folly III exhibition in South Korea. He was appointed Global Studios Curator of the 4th Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2023 in South Korea from 2022 to 2024. He has been working in architectural offices in Denmark, Finland, Japan, and South Korea.

FROM SÄYNÄTSALO TO HERNING: TRACING ALVAR AALTO'S HUMANIST MODERNISM IN DANISH WELFARE-STATE ARCHITECTURE

Leif Høgfeldt Hansen

Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949–52) by Alvar Aalto and Herning Folk High School (1960–62) by Fællestegnestuen, led by Tyge Arnfred and Viggo Møller-Jensen, address a shared architectural problem characteristic of post-war Nordic modernism: how architecture might give durable spatial form to collective life without relying on classical monumentality or overt symbolism. However, the two buildings differ substantially in programme, scale, and constructional logic; both articulate community as a spatial and experiential condition, produced through organisation, movement, and everyday use rather than façade alone. In both, a clearly articulated vertical element establishes a landmark that situates collective life within a broader territorial and cultural context.

Context in a Historical Perspective

Nordic architecture is often presented internationally as a coherent, internally consistent tradition characterised by balance, humanism, and continuity.¹ Such narratives emphasise shared values while downplaying internal differences. Closer examination reveals significant regional variations rooted in divergent cultural traditions, landscapes, and construction practices.² A strong classical tendency has historically marked Danish modernism, often described as a refinement or “perfection of the box”, emphasising proportion, restraint, and formal clarity.³ Finnish modernism, by contrast, has tended toward a more expressive and landscape-oriented architecture, shaped by topography, climate, and a tradition of spatial and material experimentation.⁴

These differences become particularly evident when comparing Arne Jacobsen's static and classically ordered modernism with Alvar Aalto's dynamic, processional, and materially expressive architecture.⁵ Although both architects shared a deep concern for detail, craftsmanship, and material quality, their conceptions of space, movement, and context diverged fundamentally. Jacobsen's architecture privileges clarity, repetition, and visual control, whereas Aalto's work emphasises variation, tactile experience, and spatial sequence. Any discussion of the reception of Finnish architecture in Denmark must therefore take these distinctions seriously. Influence operates here not as stylistic borrowing, but as the introduction of alternative architectural attitudes within Danish modernism.

Aalto in Denmark

In the years following the Second World War, Aalto's office was heavily engaged in the reconstruction and modernisation of Finland. During the second half of the 1950s, this work began to receive increased attention in Danish architectural circles. A Swedish-language reprint of Aalto's presentation of Säynätsalo Town Hall was featured in the Danish magazine *Arkitekten* in 1954.⁶

The most direct Danish engagement with Aalto occurred through collaborations with Jean-Jacques Barué, a former assistant in Aalto's Finnish office. They worked on competition projects, including an unsuccessful competition proposal in 1952 for a cemetery and funeral chapel in Kongens Lyngby. Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum in Aalborg was their joint winning entry in 1958 and realised in 1972 as the only Aalto-involved work in Denmark.⁷

After returning to Denmark, Barué developed these ideas independently. His design for Sønderborg Handelsskole in the mid-1960s, executed in red brick and organised around fan-shaped and orthogonal volumes, shows apparent affinity with Aalto's campus project for Otaniemi. Few other Danish architects maintained similarly strong connections to Finnish architecture. Paul Niepoort, who worked in Helsinki in Viljo Revell's office during the 1940s, developed an architectural language that absorbed Finnish spatial principles without direct imitation while remaining formally restrained. Projects such as Børgholm Kollegiet in Aarhus and Sønderbro Church in Horsens reveal an interest that combines values from both countries. A comparable approach appears in Køge School and the College of Education and School in Aalborg by Salli Besiakov and Nils Andersen, featuring courtyards, indirect lighting, sequential circulation, and the interaction of fan shapes and orthogonal forms.⁸

Despite their quality, these projects remained marginal within the dominant trajectory of Danish architecture. Their reliance on traditional materials, individualised detailing, and on-site craftsmanship increasingly conflicted with the prevailing emphasis on prefabrication, reinforced concrete, and industrial rationalisation that defined Danish architecture from the late 1950s onward. As a result, their influence on mainstream development remained limited.

Herning Folk High School and the Inspiration from Säynätsalo Town Hall

Herning Folk High School represents a fundamentally different response to Aalto's legacy.⁹ Designed by Fællestegnestuen in 1960, it was among the pioneering Dan-

ish projects to employ prefabricated concrete elements as a primary architectural system. By this time, prefabrication had become both a technical and ideological instrument within Danish architecture, promoted as a means to address housing shortages, rationalise construction, and embody welfare-state ideals of equality and efficiency.¹⁰

Herning fully participates in this culture. The repetitive concrete structure clad with assembled sinusoidal plates on its fourteen-storey residential tower is not just an economic solution, but an ideological statement. Standardisation suppresses individual distinction in favour of uniformity, reinforcing an institutional ethos based on equality and shared experience.¹¹ At the same time, the overall composition of tower and low horizontal courtyards establishes a clear spatial parallel to Säynätsalo Town Hall. In both cases, a vertical landmark anchors an inward-focused ensemble of communal spaces. Designed in the same year as the SAS Hotel in Copenhagen,¹² Herning also reflects contemporary Danish interests in the disciplined interplay of vertical and horizontal volumes, mediating between Aalto's civic humanism and Jacobsen's modernist rationalism.

Comparison between Säynätsalo Town Hall and Herning Folk High School

A direct comparison reveals both shared principles and decisive differences. In both projects, the courtyard functions as the primary organisational device.¹³ At Säynätsalo, Aalto arranges the town hall as an inward-facing ensemble around a raised courtyard enclosed by the council chamber, library, offices, and commercial spaces. Public life is relocated from representational frontage to shared interior space. In Herning, a sequence of courtyards, shaped by the relationship between the residential tower and communal wing structures, frames daily movement and social interaction.¹⁴

Vertical hierarchy plays a significant role in both works, though articulated differently. At Säynätsalo, authority is embedded within the ensemble through sectional differentiation rather than isolated monumentality. The council chamber occupies an elevated position, yet remains spatially continuous with the complex. At Herning, individual retreat is concentrated vertically in the tower, while collective life unfolds horizontally at ground level. In both cases, vertical differentiation organises social relations rather than symbolising power.

Neither building is conceived as a frontal object. Both are experienced through sequential movement. At Säynätsalo, oblique access routes, stairs, and compressed

passages culminate in the courtyard and the council chamber, producing an architecture apprehended through time rather than image. At Herning, circulation unfolds through corridors and repeated transitions between interior and exterior. Architecture becomes habitual, reinforcing everyday communal routines rather than exceptional events.

Materially, the projects diverge decisively. SÄYNÄTSALO is inseparable from Aalto's expressive use of brick and wood, characterised by tactile irregularity and crafted permanence. Material presence humanises civic authority through sensory engagement. Herning, by contrast, is defined by reinforced in-situ cast concrete, precast elements and wood. On the ground floor, red brick walls with black-painted wood form the courtyards. Repetition and modularity dominate, and expression arises mainly from the system and change in surface articulation. The comparison is both one of shared materiality and of contrasting material ethics.

A shared tectonic logic appears in the integration of art. At SÄYNÄTSALO, the fan-shaped timber ceiling in the council chamber is structurally suspended, creating a condition of hovering weight that frames Léger's painting within a unified spatial field. Construction operates as spatial orchestration rather than display. At Herning, suspended decorative elements by artist Gaardegaard employ an analogous logic: hung within the concrete architecture rather than fixed to it, they introduce rhythm, colour and scale without asserting hierarchy, reinforcing egalitarian spatial conditions.

Conclusion

The relationship between Herning Folk High School and SÄYNÄTSALO Town Hall is therefore not incidental but architecturally and conceptually evident. Shared principles such as courtyard-based organisation, vertical landmarking combined with anti-monumentality, sequential movement, and the integration of art as a spatial mediator demonstrate a clear lineage from Aalto's post-war civic architecture to Danish institutional modernism. However, the decisive factor in the broader dissemination and durability of this approach lies not in craft-based humanism alone, but in its successful translation into industrialised construction.¹⁵

Herning represents a critical transformation of Aalto's humanist modernism. While SÄYNÄTSALO is grounded in brick craftsmanship and tectonics, Herning rearticulates comparable social and spatial ambitions through prefabricated concrete systems and rationalised building processes capable of wide implementation.¹⁶

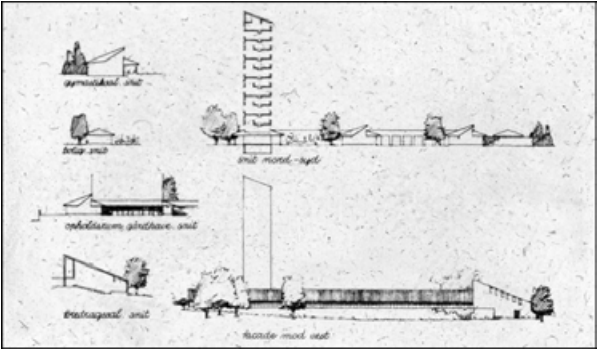
This translation proved decisive for later Danish housing culture. The architectural thinking developed within Fællestegnestuen, particularly the emphasis on courtyard structures, non-hierarchical spatial sequences, and architecture as a framework for communal life, fed directly into Vandkunsten's work from the early 1970s onward. In Vandkunsten's dense low housing projects, Aalto's spatial humanism reappears not as formal imitation but as a social and organisational logic adapted to collective housing. Courtyards function as shared everyday rooms, scale is moderated through aggregation rather than monumentality, and construction systems are industrialised yet calibrated to human use.

Seen in this light, Aalto's influence on Danish architecture persists not primarily through isolated buildings or stylistic echoes, but through a mediated lineage in which Fællestegnestuen occupies a pivotal position. Herning Folk High School stands at this hinge point, demonstrating how architecture grounded in social experience could gain cultural traction precisely because it was compatible with industrial modernity. The long-term impact of this architectural attitude thus rests not on handicraft in isolation, but on the reconciliation of humanist spatial ideals with rationalised production.¹⁷

Endnotes

- 1 Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. 4th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007)
- 2 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Tradition and Modernity", *Architectural Review* (May 1988)
- 3 William J. R Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1996)
- 4 Göran Schild, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Tyge Arnfred, "Fællestegnestuen" *Arkitektur*, Vol. 59, no. 3 (1987), 103–107.
- 7 Göran Schild, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991)
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Tyge Arnfred, "Fællestegnestuen" *Arkitektur*, Vol. 59, no. 3 (1987), 103–107.
- 10 Steen Estvad Høyer, "Fællestegnestuen" *Arkitekten*, Vol. 81, no. 3 (1979), 55–59.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 William J. R Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1996)
- 13 Alvar Aalto, "Säynätsalo Rådhus", *Arkitekten*, Vol. 12 (1954), 217–228.
- 14 Steen Estvad Høyer, "Fællestegnestuen" *Arkitekten*, Vol. 81, no. 3 (1979), 55–59.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.

Figures



1. Original elevations and sections of
Herning Folk High School, 1960.
Photo: Drawing © Arkitekturbilleder.dk



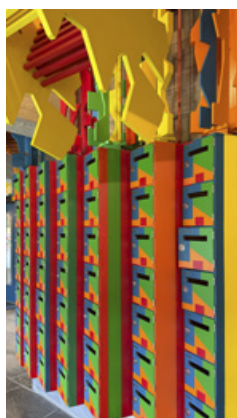
2. The tactile transition from outer to
inner space at Säynätsalo Town Hall.
Photo: Leif Høgfelt Hansen © Leif
Høgfelt Hansen



3. The inner courtyard with the council tower at Säjnäsalo Town Hall.
Photo: Leif Høgfældt Hansen © Leif Høgfældt Hansen



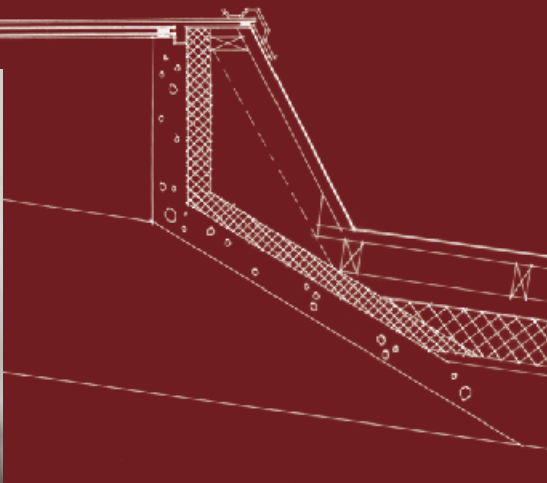
4. The inner courtyard with the student tower at Herning Folk High School.
Photo: Leif Høgfældt Hansen © Leif Høgfældt Hansen



5. Artwork by Gaardegaard at the entrance of Herning Folk High School.
Photo: Leif Høgfældt Hansen © Leif Høgfældt Hansen

6. Entrance under the student tower at Herning Folk High School.
Photo: Leif Høgfældt Hansen © Leif Høgfældt Hansen

B u i l d i n g s



Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu

Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu is an art historian and PhD student at the University of Jyväskylä. She is currently completing her doctoral thesis, in which she examines the motives and experiences of visitors to Alvar Aalto's house museums. Previously, she taught museology at the University of Jyväskylä for twelve years. Her master's thesis in art history dealt with Alvar Aalto's museum projects from the 1920s to the 1950s. Later, she has written, for instance, about the design of the Kunsten Museum of Modern Art in Aalborg (2017) by Alvar Aalto, Jean-Jaques Barüel and Elissa Aalto, and – together with architect Päivi Lukkarinen MA – about Aalto's unrealized plan for a chapel on the University of Jyväskylä campus (2023). She is also currently researching and writing about Aalto's plans for the Åland Islands.

Malmisalo-Lensu also holds a master's degree in education, and her interests include museum education and visitor experiences. In 2021, she published a paper on authentic experiences at Aalto's Experimental House. As a sideline, she also enjoys guiding visitors at the Aalto2 Museum Centre, at the Experimental House, and on the University of Jyväskylä campuses.

AALTO SIGHTS THROUGH THE EYES OF VISITORS

Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu

Introduction

The Aalto House, Studio Aalto and the Experimental House attract thousands of visitors annually.¹ While many of them are professionals in architecture or design, the sites are also visited by many non-professionals – individuals with a personal interest in history, architecture, or cultural environments. The number of visitors has increased rapidly and is today higher than ever before. Data has been collected on visitors' countries of origin and the number of guests visiting the sites; however, only one in-depth study on the quality or characteristics of the visitor experience has previously been conducted at the Aalto House and the Aalto Studio in 2013.²

Conducting a study of the visitors is important in many ways and should be undertaken regularly. The knowledge of what visitors think helps museums develop their practice and provide more satisfying experiences. The aim of this study is to examine what visitors said about the buildings and what they found particularly interesting, i.e., which details they paid attention to. Knowing how Aalto sights are seen through the eyes of visitors helps museums to focus on things that are important to visitors.

Methods

The data consists of 74 semi-structured interviews conducted at the three house museums and was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis compared responses from 35 professionals and 39 non-professionals, out of which 14 professionals and 16 non-professionals were interviewed at the Experimental House, 15 professionals and 16 non-professionals at the Aalto House, and 6 professionals and 7 non-professionals at Studio Aalto. Professionals were considered to include those who had been trained, or were being trained, in the fields of architecture, design, or related design work.

In a thematic analysis, themes are recurring topics in the material, and in the analysis the themes are grouped for more detailed examination. The analysis was conducted on the terms set by the material: there were no predetermined categories. Instead, different classes and groups emerged during the process of classifying the responses.

Results³

The findings reveal that the buildings had admirers. At the Experimental House, 6 professionals viewed it in its historical context and said that the house was, among other things, an important building and a masterpiece, as well as interesting and historically significant. The building was described as still very charming and beautiful, precious, pleasantly informal, and welcoming. Its physical appearance was described as clear, simple, and rather roughly made, distinctive and experimental, and human in scale, even though it was a finer example than an ordinary Finnish summer cottage. The atmosphere of the building was considered pleasant, effortless, and homely, despite some modern solutions. It was a unique, interesting building, good architecture in a small scale.

Similarly, 8 non-professionals considered the house fine and exciting, playful, “really good”, “really nice”, and beautiful. One Finnish man, who was familiar with Finnish summer cottage culture, said that the building was unusual as a cottage and more impressive in its setting. The characteristics of the house that were mentioned included its advanced nature, distinctiveness, experimental quality, and functionality. The house was also seen in its historical context as a significant expression of a leading master of architecture and, due to the location information that was apparently difficult to find, a “special secret”. Otherwise, there were only praising comments from both professionals and non-professionals about the building’s site and how well the house is connected to the surrounding nature. Negative comments appeared from 1 professional and 2 non-professionals, who described the house as not remarkable, impractical, and poorly built.

Most visitors paid attention especially to the courtyard and to the foundations – or the lack of foundations – of the guest wing and the sauna (Fig. 1). Professionals paid attention to, among other things, the patio’s brick experiments, the size of the space, and the way the space “opens up”. The nonprofessionals also mentioned the patio bricks and the combination of the patio and the landscape opening from it (Fig. 2).

In the Aalto House, 13 professionals and 14 non-professionals talked about the house positively. The professionals considered the building magnificent and amazing, with Aalto’s personality visible in it. The building was considered to be ahead of its time, and it was regarded as unusual and innovative, where Aalto had had the freedom to make distinctive solutions. It was seen as embodying both Finnishness and “lovely Japaneseness”. Attention was paid to the warm atmosphere, which was described as homelike, lovely, calm, and humane. The Aalto House was something

one could expect from a master, but it nevertheless exceeded expectations. Only two professionals had negative comments; an interior designer thought the house was modest, and for an architect, the house was too cramped and minimalistic.

The non-professionals considered the building fine, beautiful, bright, pleasant, and homely. As a total work of art, its atmosphere was special. It was also considered practical in combining home and work. It was seen as representing Finnishness, the Aaltos, and 20th century architecture. In addition, the building was inspiring and offered ideas. Two non-professionals were not as fond of the house; for one the house was of modest quality, and the other did not feel the house was so homely. She had expected a museum exhibition, not a home museum.

The visitors' attention was mostly drawn to the furniture, walls with different materials, windows (the views but also the frames and the hinges), fireplaces, and the lighting (Fig. 3). The furniture the professionals mentioned included the raised bed in the upstairs guest room, the stools and chairs. For example, the old Italian dining room chairs were said to bring warmth and a sentimental aspect to the dining room. Among the nonprofessionals, the long table in Elissa's bedroom was admired; one non-professional even said he intended to make a similar one for his own home. Also, the fabric-covered headboard, the raised bed, and the atelier's worktables were mentioned. There were no significant differences in the answers, but the non-professionals were more interested in the fireplaces and lamps than the professionals.

In Studio Aalto, all professionals were astonished by the pleasant atmosphere and by the lightness and brightness of the building. The light was "very nice" and "really nice". The building was described as simple, functional, and refined, where everything flows and is in harmony. Likewise, all non-professionals admired the curved-wall space, saying it was astonishing and truly impressive. One non-professional especially enjoyed the contrast between the dim downstairs and the bright upstairs. The simplicity of the building combined with the richness of the materials was also appreciated. The Studio was considered unusual, special, and "funny" due to its curved shapes and oblique angles. There were no significant differences between the professionals and non-professionals, but the non-professionals paid some more attention to the furniture (Fig. 4).

The buildings were also experienced as a poly-space,⁴ i.e., 20 visitors explained how they had a feeling in their mind for Aalto's time. For example, an architect said at the Experimental House how he felt like he was coming over to visit Alvar, who had just gone out to a nearby grocery store. Similarly, at the Aalto House, an archi-

tect said: “Really, what I wanted most of all was to feel the spirit of the home. To feel it. And I think I kind of felt it. I could visualize him and his widow here, the fire is on. I can visualize this. [–] I liked to imagine with the fire on in the studio, minus 20 outside, the energy from group of architects designing must have been good.”

Conclusion

This study examined how professionals and nonprofessionals experienced the Aalto House Museums and what they paid attention to. The comments were mainly positive, but also opposing opinions were expressed. In other words, the buildings did not – borrowing Alvar Aalto’s own words – “knock everybody dead”.⁵ The visitors highlighted specific elements, such as the Experimental House’s patio, the Aalto House’s furniture, and the Studio’s exceptional natural light and the space with the curved wall. Most visitors expressed strong admiration and described the buildings as distinctive, warm, and historically significant. A notable finding is that many visitors experienced the houses as polyspaces, imagining Aalto’s presence and everyday life within them. The results indicate that Aalto’s buildings continue to function as evocative cultural environments that invite diverse forms of engagement and interpretation. The visitors interpret the houses from each of their own cultural and personal perspectives. For some, it is still the intimate home of the Aaltos; for others, an ordinary house museum or a historical piece of architecture.

Endnotes

- 1 In 2025 there were 2,237 visitors to the Experimental House, 19,235 to the Aalto House, and 11,355 to Studio Aalto. Finnish Heritage Agency, “Museum Statistics 2024”: <https://www.museotilasto.fi/statistics> (accessed 29.1.2026).
- 2 Hilde Rezelman, “The Alvar Aalto Experience: Aalto Studio & House Visitor Research” (Internship project, Reinwardt Academy Amsterdam School of Arts, 2013).
- 3 Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu, “Alvar Aallon arkkitehtuuri kohteena: kävijöiden motiivit ja kokemukset” (PhD thesis, University of Jyväskylä, unpublished manuscript, 2026).
- 4 Johanna Turunen et al., “Poly-space: Creating New Concepts Through Reflexive Team Ethnography”, in *Challenges and Solutions in Ethnographic Research: Ethnography with a Twist*, eds. Tuuli Lähdesmäki et al. (London: Routledge, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355608>
- 5 Harry Lönnroth, “‘Lyödään ne hepnaadilla’: Alvar Aallon kielellinen elämäkerta”, *Virittäjä*, Vol. 127, Iss. 2 (2023), 164. <https://doi.org/10.23982/vir.110983>

Figures

	Professionals	Non-professionals	Total
THE EXPERIMENTAL HOUSE			
Courtyard	11	13	24
Foundations	5	6	11
Furniture	5	4	9
THE AALTO HOUSE			
Furniture	7	12	19
Walls / Wall materials	5	6	11
Fireplaces	2	7	9
Lighting / Lamps and natural light	3	5	8
STUDIO AALTO			
Natural light	3	4	7
Aalto's studio	3	4	7
Furniture	2	5	7

1. The most interesting features and objects in the Aalto house museums.



2. At the Experimental House, visitors were especially impressed by the patio and the views from there. Photo: Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu.

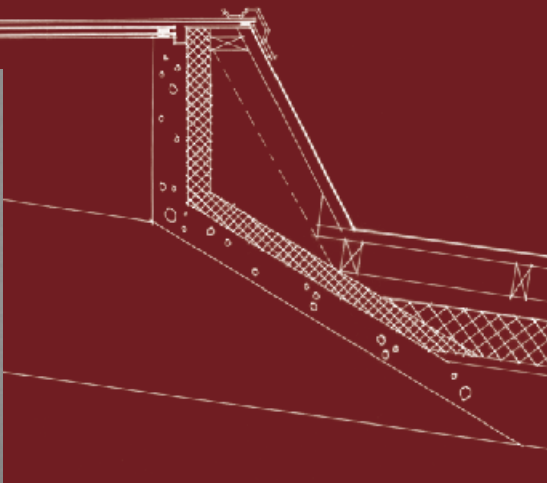


3. At the Aalto House, visitors' attention was drawn, among other things, to the furniture, windows, and the lighting. The people in the image are not related to the study.
Photo: Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu.



4. In Studio Aalto, the curved wall and the lightness of the space were admired. The furniture also drew interest. The people in the image are not related to the study.
Photo: Anne-Maija Malmisalo-Lensu.

B u i l d i n g s



Troels Rugbjerg

Troels Rugbjerg is a doctoral researcher at ASUTUT, the Sustainable Housing Design research group at Tampere University, Finland, and a Teaching Associate Professor at the Aarhus School of Architecture, Denmark. Troels' research involves case studies of selected housing projects in the Nordic countries from the modern era (1930-1970), immediately preceding the development of a contemporary concept of sustainability, to learn about architectural properties that may contribute to sustainable housing practices in the Nordic countries today. Troels is a co-author of the article "Re-evaluating the Aaltos' Pre-war Housing: A field study of the home environment in a case study", *Architectural Research in Finland*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2024), and co-editor of the book *Utzonia: From/to Denmark with Love* (Italy: Listlab, 2020).

EFFECTS OF SOLAR GAINS IN THE AALTOS' TERASSITALO

Troels Rugbjerg

Introduction

“The blossoms face in different directions, they are shaded by different branches, leaves, and adjacent blossoms. This determines the variety of forms. Each blossom has a different position, a different relationship with the stem, a different orientation, and so on.” (Aalto, 1941)¹

In this quote, Alvar Aalto highlights nature's ability to realise a variety of possibilities within standardisation, leading him to criticise technological standardisation, which, he argues, diminishes variation and reduces relations to local circumstances in modern architecture.

In Sunila, Kotka, Alvar and Aino Aalto contributed to the design of a pulp factory and several housing blocks which were influenced by the modern possibilities for standardisation while, at the same time, meticulously related to local circumstances.

Additionally, in relation to the pulp production in Kauttua, located at approximately 61°N, the Aaltos contributed with the design of several houses, but ultimately, few were built. However, one housing block – Terassitalo – the terraced house, was realised in 1937-38, positioned on a steep slope with four floors and six apartments (Fig. 1).

In the article “Re-evaluating the Aaltos' Pre-war Housing: a field study of the home environment in a case study” (2024), we presented a study of the indoor environment of apartments in Terassitalo, which was also related to studies of apartments in Sunila. The study involved monitoring temperatures, relative humidity and light in a lower apartment over a period of several months, during which we found relatively even air temperatures, affected by active heating from radiators regulated by thermostats.² These even temperatures contrasted with outside temperatures, as well as the light inside, which varied considerably both annually and daily. From this contrast, this short paper aims to add further knowledge about the thermal environment in apartments in Terassitalo by examining the effect of solar gains on operative temperatures as a passive strategy.

The study

This study focuses on the third-floor apartment in Terassitalo, which is approximately 100 m² in size and currently open to the public (Figs. 3-5). The building's overall design means that the apartment is oriented to the outside on three sides, leaving it exposed to daylight nearly all day, year-round. The apartment's building envelope consists of massive brickwork, with no apparent insulation, according to drawings.³

The entrance is on the eastern side, leading into a larger living area with a wide south-facing window and access to a terrace (Fig. 2). A smaller west-facing window in the living area concludes the west-facing wall. Also, towards the west, one finds a smaller room, which is today integrated with the nearby kitchen, while the bathroom is oriented towards the north, with no windows. On the eastern side of the apartment, three rooms have east-facing windows.

Here I have followed the calculation method developed by Arens et al., and by Lawrence to construct experimental plans with isotherms, showing where and when operative temperatures are affected by solar gains on the winter solstice, the vernal equinox, and the summer solstice (Figs. 3-5).⁴ The calculation considers effective radiant flux and involves solar and window geometry, and are calculated for three times a day for each of the three times a year, when the sun is perpendicular to each of the three sides of the apartment exposed to daylight, which is when the azimuth of the sun is 65° for the eastern side, 155° for the southern side, and 245° for the western side. The building's angle was identified from studying aerial photos.

At the winter solstice, solar gain is limited by the sun's lower altitude, and even when positioned perpendicular to the larger south-facing window, the effect is only 2°C (Fig. 3). However, as the low light reaches deep into the living area, so does the limited effect of solar gains. There are no solar gains on either the eastern or the western side of the apartment at this time of year, when the sun rises late and sets early.

At the vernal equinox, one finds greater solar gain, resulting in considerably higher operative temperatures in comparison to the winter solstice (Fig. 4). Before noon, when the sun is perpendicular to the southern window, the operative temperature increases by up to 12°C near the window. This strong effect comes from the sun's relatively high altitude; however, it also means the solar gain effect only reaches 2,3 metres into the room from this window. For the smaller windows on the western side, the increase in operative temperatures is less due to the sun's lower altitude later in the day; however, this means the warmth penetrates deeper into the apart-

ment. Similar to the winter solstice, there are no solar gains on the eastern side of the apartment.

By the summer solstice, solar gains raise the operative temperatures on all three sides, as the sun rises early and sets late (Fig. 5). The lower altitude in the morning, however, means that the rise in operative temperatures on the eastern side is limited; however, the effect reaches deep into the rooms. The high altitude at the summer solstice means that the solar gains from the south-facing window are intense in the living area, but also that the effect on operative temperatures does not reach more than 1 metre into the living area. Neither through the west-facing windows does the powerful effect reach far inside, as the sun is still high in the sky at this time of year.

From these studies, one may identify the apartment's layout and the different orientations of the windows as following a daily and an annual rhythm, driven by both sunlight as well as solar gains.

Towards the east are private rooms, where residents may sleep without being bothered by light or the sun's warmth, but during the summertime, they may be awakened by it in the morning.

The larger living area allows for daytime social activities. Much sunlight can stream through the wide south-facing window. The lower pale light at the winter solstice penetrates deep into the apartment, but with little effect on operational temperatures. On the vernal equinox, one finds a higher effect from solar gains, closer to the south-facing window, where it may be either pleasant or too bright and warm to stay inside; however, the deep living area allows residents to withdraw to the rear during the middle of the day, which is not affected by solar gains. Using the awning found outside the south-facing window may also help reduce the sun's effect. Awnings were added subsequently and not as part of the Aaltos' original design. During the mid-summer, very high operative temperatures occur near the south-facing window; however, larger parts of the living area will be less affected by the sun, and residents can, e.g., withdraw to the wall facing west in the living area, where there will be a pleasant, less warm 'niche' during the afternoon.

One can imagine gathering later in the day by the smaller west-facing window in the living area, possibly for dinner, as the Aaltos suggested by indicating a dining table in a furnished plan.⁵ Not at the winter solstice, though, where there is no effect from the sun; however, by the vernal equinox, it may be comfortable to come together by the warmth near this window when it might still be relatively cold outside. At the

summer solstice, one may wait in gathering here until the evening when the warmth of the sun has passed.

Conclusion

This study of the effect of solar gains on operative temperatures in apartments in the Aaltos' Terassitalo shows considerable annual and daily variations, compared with the more even air temperatures monitored in an earlier study and affected by active heating. It has revealed how the layout of a studied apartment, with differently oriented windows and time-specific sun conditions, not unlike the varied positions of blossoms Alvar Aalto found in nature, creates opportunities to achieve solar gains (or avoid them) as a supplement to active heating.

We may learn from this integration of passive strategy, which remains relevant today as we seek to reduce energy use and thereby CO2 emissions. Also, organising residences to align with daily and annual rhythms may foster a closer, more meaningful connection to the world, providing a sense of belonging.

Endnotes

- 1 Alvar Aalto, "The Reconstruction of Europe is the Key Problem for the Architecture of our Time" (1941), in *Alvar Aalto in his own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 154.
- 2 Troels Rugbjerg, Dean Hawkes, Olli-Paavo Koponen, Ilmari Lahdelma, Ranald Lawrence, and Sofie Pelsmakers, "Re-evaluating the Aaltos' Pre-war Housing: a field study of the home environment in a case study", *Architectural Research in Finland*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2024), 120-146. doi. org/10.37457/arf.146876
- 3 See, for example: Kauttua, Terassitalo, Pituusleikkaus 1/50 (AAA 81/505). Alvar Aalto Foundation.
- 4 Edward Arens, Tyler Hoyt, Xin Zhou, Li Huang, Hui Zhang, and Stefano Schiavon, "Modeling the Comfort Effects of Short-Wave Solar Radiation Indoors", *Building and Environment* 88 (June 2015): 3–9. Ranald Lawrence, "Conserving the historic environment: thermal monitoring of The Hill House, by Charles Rennie Mackintosh", *Architectural Science Review* (2025). doi. org/10.1080/00038628.2025.2565339
- 5 Alvar Aalto, "Portaaton kerrostalo". *Arkkitehti*, 11/12, 1939, 163.

Figures



1. Terassitalo. Exterior view from southeast, looking up the steep slope.
March 21, 2022, 13:41
© author.



2. Terassitalo. Interior view of the larger window in the living area of the third-floor apartment.
October 18, 2022, 12:56
© author.



3. Terassitalo. Third floor plan with isotherms indicating operative temperatures calculated from 19°C on the winter solstice due to solar gains at the solar azimuths: 65°, 155° and 245°. © author.

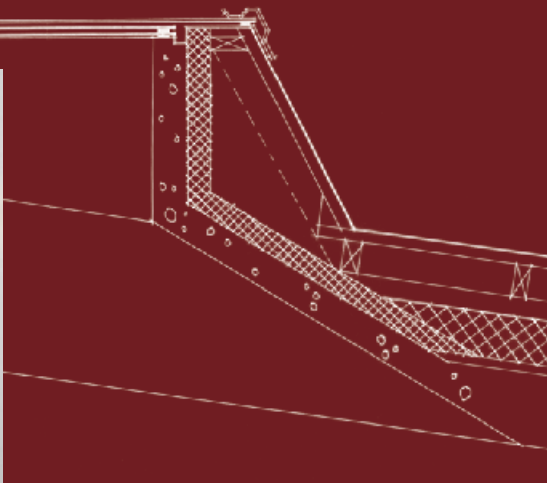


4. Terassitalo. Third floor plan with isotherms indicating operative temperatures calculated from 20°C on the vernal equinox due to solar gains at the solar azimuths: 65°, 155° and 245°. © author.



5. Terassitalo. Third floor plan with isotherms indicating operative temperatures calculated from 21°C on the summer solstice due to solar gains at the solar azimuths: 65°, 155° and 245°, considering daylight saving time.
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B u i l d i n g s



Szymon Ruszczewski

Szymon Ruszczewski is an architect, researcher, and scholar, who graduated from the University of Florence, and later received a Ph.D. from the University of Sheffield. His work focuses on themes related to the history, heritage, and conservation of modern architecture. He published earlier his research on Alvar Aalto and his work in Italy, and on Jerzy Sołtan, a Polish member of CIAM and Team 10. He has taught at the universities in Florence, Pisa, and Sheffield, and at the Polytechnic of Milan. He works as a registered architect in Florence.

PUBLISHING AALTO IN POLAND

Szymon Ruszczewski

Politics and architectural publications

Over the years, paper publications were the main source of information on foreign architecture for those who were unable to travel. As a result, what was published and how designs were published could have had a significant impact on the training of future architects. With this important role, whatever factors influence publications have many further implications. This paper illustrates how publications reflect changing architectural, geopolitical, and social frameworks, based on the Polish architectural magazines *Architektura i Budownictwo* (1922-1939) and *Architektura* (1947-1991), along with other publications issued in Poland between the 1930s and the 1980s. This analysis explains the changes that have occurred over the years in illustrating modern architecture coming from abroad in Poland, using the example of Alvar Aalto's works. Through a chronological analysis of different stages in architectural publications, the paper aims to illustrate the influence of politics on architectural publications.

During the interwar period in Poland, modern or functionalist architecture gradually became more important, and with the emergence of the group Praesens, associated with Polish CIAM members, new ideas coming from abroad gained popularity. Thanks to the international exchanges, since 1933, the main architectural magazine in Poland, *Architektura i Budownictwo*, published by the national architects' association, began to include overviews of the foreign architectural press, with regular references to articles in various journals, including *Arkkittehti*. One of the first notices from Finland appeared in issue no. 08/1933 referencing *Arkkittehti* no. 06/1933 with an article on Paimio Sanatorium, labelled in the overview as "extraordinary building".¹ A month later, in no. 09/1933, a regular article titled in Finnish "Tuberkuloosi parantola" named Alvar Aalto as one of the most well-known architects in Finland, with the building itself described in detail regarding technical and construction-related aspects, as well as its functional layout (Fig. 1).² The echo of Paimio continued to resonate, as again in no. 10/1934, there was an additional mention of an article in *Arkkittehti* no. 06/1934 on row houses for the sanatorium's staff, whereas in no. 02/1935, there was another mention of an article from no. 06/1935 of the Czech magazine *Stavba* (1922-1938), again on Paimio. References to Aalto's work, however, were not solitary. Over the years 1933-1939, more than 50 mentions of articles on Finnish architecture were included in those press overviews, including in the later years also the Turun Sanomat building and Aalto's Finnish pavilion in Paris

in 1937,³ which was also photographed in a report from the fair.⁴ However, these references halted after 1939 when the magazine stopped being published due to the war. In 1947, after a couple of years of delay following the end of the war, a new magazine *Architektura* began to be published, although it was much less internationally inclined than its predecessor. In 1948-1949, the foreign publication overview was centred on communist countries, with few references to publications on modern architecture elsewhere. These limited references, with no citation of Finland, were further restricted after June 1949, when the Polish communist party launched a manifesto on socialist realist architecture, with the magazine becoming a propaganda tool for the authorities. Already, no. 06-07-08/1949 was oozing with socialist realist architecture, reflecting a radical stylistic shift from the previous issues.

It took years to overcome this impasse, during which no publication was allowed on modern architecture and – of course – that included both Finnish modern buildings and Aalto's works. Only in 1954 was the overview of foreign publications re-established, and in February 1955, there was a first non-negative reference concerning non-communist countries, with a text on residential architecture in Denmark. In that gradual abandonment of the socialist realist phantom, the first mention of Aalto's work came only in no. 04/1958 with a reprint of an Italian article, including images and drawings of a few earlier designs in Helsinki and Jyväskylä. In no. 07/1960, he was again named one of the most well-known Finnish architects in a text on Finnish architecture. One had to wait until no. 04-05/1968 to read more in detail about one of his designs – the main university building in Otaniemi, praised for its technical, acoustic, and lighting quality.⁵ The same year marked the publication of the Polish translation of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture* (updated to the second edition from 1949), marking the first longer overview of Aalto's work. However, the 19-year delay in publishing the text made it clear that none of his latest buildings could have been included, with the most recent one being MIT's Baker House. In fact, some lamented the poor access to foreign architectural press and publications in Poland.⁶ Nonetheless, since the late 1960s, there was a surge of new articles on Finnish architecture in *Architektura*, mainly due to personal connections and interest of one of the contributors, Mieczysław Piprek, who wrote on Finland in *Architektura* several times, in nos. 04-05/1968, 09/1969, 01/1970, 03/1971, 10/1973, 08/1975, and 02/1976, always quoting and analysing Aalto's works: Villa Mairea's sauna (1969), the plans for cultural centres in Rovaniemi and in Seinäjoki (1970), Sunila factory's housing (1971), Finlandia Hall and the Kaufmann Rooms (1973), the libraries in Rovaniemi and Otaniemi (1975) (Fig. 2), and Paimio Sanatorium, Säynätsalo Town Hall, the main university building in Otaniemi, and Finlandia Hall in a broader commentary on Finnish architecture (1976). In particular, the extended article on Finlandia Hall praised the building as an excellent composition of marble,

granite, nature, and water, while its interiors exemplify “Aalto’s perfect skill in the use of wood in architecture”.⁷ Apart from this personal interest, however, many publications on modern architecture as a whole did not relate much to Aalto. In 1969, one publication only quoted his name, while another one did not mention him at all, while including various references to foreign examples of modern architecture.⁸ In 1972, only some photographs from Sunila were included in another commentary on modern architecture, whereas in 1976, only a few buildings were briefly mentioned in the text.⁹ An overview publication from 1974 stood out as much more inclusive of Aalto’s work, underlining once more the importance of Paimio as an example of functionalism, yet with a more human approach, and mentioning a range of other projects across Finland, including photographs from Viipuri, Sunila, Noormarkku, Cambridge, Säynätsalo, Seinäjoki, and Helsinki, and making references to Aalto’s work abroad in Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Iran.¹⁰ The article from *Architektura* no. 02/1976 similarly praised Aalto’s “truly humanistic approach to humankind, to our material and spiritual needs”, moving away from the purely functionalist reading of architecture from the 1930s.¹¹

With Aalto’s passing, it was natural to witness an increase in the number of publications about his works. In an obituary article from no. 01-02/1977, the author stated that “a lot has already been published on the work of this architect, including a few exhaustive monographs”,¹² which means that undoubtedly foreign publications became more accessible in Poland since no Polish monographs had been issued by that date. Similar to earlier publications by Pipek, the focus was given to Aalto’s human and humanistic approach, along with a chronology of the most important works (organised in three periods – “first white”, “red”, and “second white”), with a dozen designs more thoroughly discussed, among which for the first time was a church (Vuoksenniska), marking a relevant change for the communist country. In the following years and with further opening up of international contacts, two monographs on Aalto’s work were published in Polish, by Tadeusz Barucki (1980) and by Mieczysław Pipek (1987).¹³ Even if the first booklet was limited in size, it clearly demonstrated that more exchanges were possible – with references to foreign articles (Finnish, German, Italian, British, Spanish, and French), along with quotes from Giedion and Leonardo Mosso. It praised the architect for his creativity and human touch, as well as for flexible standardisation, without deviating from what could have been written about Aalto on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The second monograph by Pipek, much more extensive, included a range of previously unpublished designs, giving space to the latest designs, such as the church in Riola and the opera house in Essen, stressing the important role of Elissa Aalto. Similar to Barucki, the publication had access to foreign publications (mainly Swiss, German, British, Austrian, and Finnish) and its rich graphic documentation was also made available

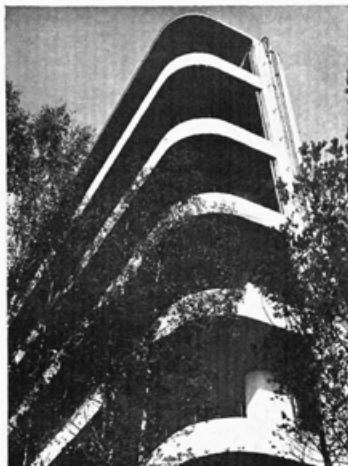
thanks to the material from the Museum of Finnish Architecture. The following year, in 1988, the same author published a monograph on architecture in Finland,¹⁴ featuring more than 110 architects and their works, including the most important works by Aalto, focussing, however, on the designs that were previously published and discussed – the Otaniemi main building, Paimio, and some libraries.

After 1989, with the fall of communism, the reality of publishing and of access to various material further progressed, and more and more foreign publications became available. This demonstrates though how much architectural publications – and mere access to information – could be influenced by political regimes, as shown by the attached scheme (Fig. 3). Whereas the 1930s in Poland was dominated by the willingness to be connected, to build, and to learn about new trends and experiences, the black hole of socialist realism from the 1950s not only prevented publications on modern architecture, but also created a persistent delay in architectural criticism for the following years, which was gradually overcome only by the late 1980s. Such an impact on publications would then influence local architectural production, with less access to novelties, trends, and foreign experiences.

Endnotes

- 1 "Przegląd czasopism", *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 8 (1933), 260.
- 2 Przemysław Siwik, "Tuberkuloosi parantola", *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 9 (1933), 288-289.
- 3 "Przegląd czasopism", *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 2 (1935), 62-64 (p. 63). "Przegląd czasopism", *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 12 (1936), 409-412 (p. 412).
- 4 Kazimierz Marczewski, "Na marginesie Wystawy Paryskiej 1937", *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 8 (1937), 292-296, (p. 296).
- 5 Mieczysław Piprek, "Nowa architektura Helsinek", *Architektura*, 4-5 (1968), 139-160, (p. 160).
- 6 Jerzy Sołtan letter to Le Corbusier, 15.03.1955, R3-4-546-001, R3-4-547-001, Fondation Le Corbusier.
- 7 Translated from Polish by the author. Mieczysław Piprek, "Finlandia-talo", *Architektura*, 10 (1973), 404-408 (p. 404).
- 8 Jadwiga Sławińska, *Ekspresja sił w nowoczesnej architekturze* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1969).
- 9 Piotr Biegański, *U źródeł architektury współczesnej* (Warsaw: PWN, 1972). Monika Buchner, Andrzej Buchner, and Jan Laube, *Zarys projektowania i historii architektury* (Warsaw: WSiP, 1976).
- 10 Przemysław Trzeciak, *Przygody architektury XX wieku* (Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1974).
- 11 Translated from Polish by the author. Mieczysław Piprek, "Finlandia", *Architektura*, 2 (1976), 11-29 (p. 12).
- 12 Translated from Polish by the author. Andrzej Niezabitowski, "Alvar Aalto 1898-1976", *Architektura*, 1-2 (1977), 59-68 (p. 59).
- 13 Tadeusz Barucki, *Alvar Aalto* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1980). Mieczysław Piprek, *Alvar Aalto* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1987).
- 14 Mieczysław Piprek, *Architektura Finlandii* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1988).

Figures



Zdjęcia wykonał Przemysław Stwik



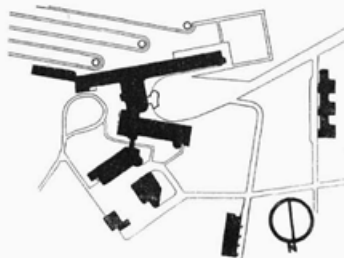
1—3. Arch. Alvar Aalto (Finlandja). Sanatorium dla gruźlików w Paimio (Finlandja).

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TUBERKULOOSI PARANTOLA.

Bardzo ciekawym przykładem współczesnego rozwiązania gmachu sanatorium jest Tuberkuloosi Parantola w Paimio w Finlandji. Jest to sanatorium dla gruźlików, postawione według nowych wytycznych architektury i medycyny. Zdjęcia powyższe to rzut oka na charakterystyczne fragmenty głównego bloku. Dają one obraz podejścia do nowoczesnej architektury projektodawcy, arch. Alvara Aalto, jednego z najślawniejszych architektów Finlandji, znanego wyznawcy i pioniera racjonalizmu.

Główny blok o kubaturze 40812 mtr³ zawiera od strony południowej pokoje dla chorych, a od północnej restaurację.

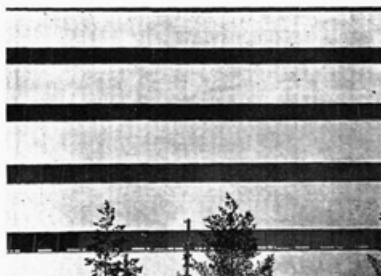


część gospodarczą i mieszkania niższej służby. Poza tem elewację południową powiększa skrzydło, utworzone z tarasów, przeznaczonych na leżalnie.

Pozostałe budynki o łącznej kubaturze 5017 m³ to domki naczelnego dyrektora, domki lekarzy, starszej służby i kotłownia.

Konstrukcja: szkielet żelbetowy, ramowo-słupowy.

Taras i balkony betonowe nietynkowane. Futryny zarówno okienne, jak drzwiowe żelazne, jedynie okna w pokojach dla chorych mają futryny drewniane. Ciekawa koncepcja centralnego ogrzewania umieszczonego na strzpie. Płyty



1. Page from the 1933 article in *Architektura i Budownictwo* on the Paimio Sanatorium showing photographs and including functional and technical analysis of the design. Image in the public domain.

Publiczna biblioteka w Rovaniemi

Kubatura 12 500 m³

Powierzchnia użytkowa 3054 m²

Księgozbiór złożony z 12 500 tomów.

Biblioteka jest pierwszym wybudowanym obiektem miejskiego centrum kulturalnego, którego autorem są **Alvar i Eelso Aalto**.

Projekt ten łącząc wszystkie cechy charakterystyczne dla twórczości Aalto, stanowi pełne rozwinięcie jego poprzednich rozwiązań centrów w Seinäjoki oraz w Yvaskulle. Prace projektowe prowadzono od 1961 do końca 1963 r.

Budowa biblioteki trwała od lutego 1964 do czerwca 1965 r., czyli zaledwie półtora roku.

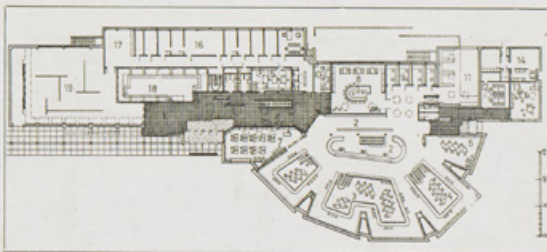
Cechą charakterystyczną rozwiązania były biblioteki jest czytelne podkreślenie wyniesionymi świetlikami wachlarzowo rozwiniętej głównej sali czytelni. Z płaskiego trapezowego terenu wystają białe płaszczyzny ścian wykończonych polewanymi elementami ceramicznymi. Cokoły i fragmenty podziałów z ciemnego granitu. Elementy konstrukcyjne świetlików, płaszczyzny dachowe, blusarka drewniana i okienna oraz szereg detali – z mosiądzu. Całość tworzy znakomite zestawienie materiałowo-kolorystyczne.

Wąjście główne założył Aalto od strony nieca wymiesionej bryły dużej sali czytelni. Wąjście to prowadzi do obszernego hallu z częścią ekspozycyjną i zejściem do działu zbiorów lapońskich (Rovaniemi jest stolicą Laponii) oraz działu muzycznego. Jedną z podstawowych idei hallu są ekspozycyjnych może być wykorzystywana do umieszczania w niej prelekcji albo kameralnych przedstawień teatralnych. Hall otwiera się na centralnie położoną lodę obsługi – wypoczynkową biblioteki. Właścicielka duża sala czytelni ma dwie partie zagłębione o ok. 1 m poniżej poziomu podłogi. Zagłębienia te pozwalają na stworzenie trzech kameralnych, wydzielonych oneksoów dla kolekcji lapońskiej, czytelni dorosłych i wreszcie dla działu młodzieżowego. W sąsiedztwie tego ostatniego ułożono pomieszczenia czytelni dziecięcej, biblioteki podręcznej, wydzielone pomieszczenia dla indywidualnej pracy naukowej oraz windy do transportu książek.

Na szczególną uwagę zasługuje znakomite rozwiązanie oświetlenia naturalnego wszystkich wnętrz. Poza zróżnicowanymi świetlikami o znacznych płaszczyznach okiennych wprowadzono liczne doświetlające kapuki szklane, co ma szczególnie duże znaczenie na dalekiej północy ze względu na znaczny niedobór oświetlenia słonecznego.

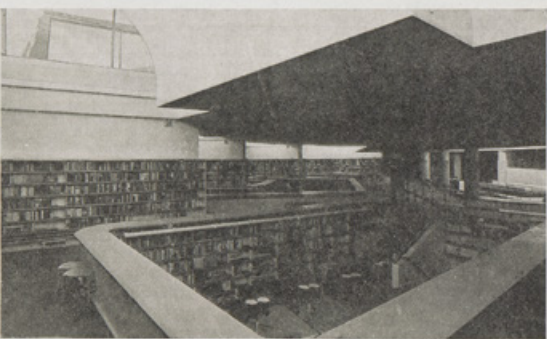
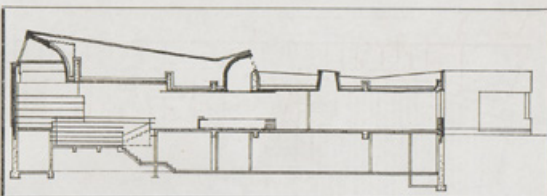
Na poziomie piwnic przewidziano magazyn książek z odpowiednimi pomieszczeniami towarzyszącymi. Dostawa książek odbywa się windą z położonych na poziomie parteru rozładowni będących zarazem garażem samochodów bibliotecznych.

Również na poziomie piwnic zgromadzono największy na świecie zbiór książek oraz nagrań związanych z Laponią, przy czym pomieszczenia te mają świetne warunki akustyczne.



Rzut poziomy: 1 – hall wejściowy z ekspozycją, 2 – centralna loda obsługi, 3 – czytelnia dorosłych, 4 – dział młodzieżowy, 5 – dział dziecięcy, 6 – kolekcja lapońska w hallu, 7 – biblioteka podręczna, 8 – czytelnia czasopiśm, 9 – pomieszczenie do pracy studenckiej, 10 – pomieszczenie gospodarcze, 11 – rozładownia książek z magazynem biblioteki ruchomej i garażem, 12 – pomieszczenie kółka studyjnego, 13 – pokój do opowiadania bajek, 14 – mieszkanie intendenta, 15 – centralny katalog, 16 – biuro, 17 – kawiarnia, 18 – sala ekspozycyjna ornitologiczna, 19 – sala ekspozycyjna oraz teatralno-kinowa

Przekrój poprzeczny



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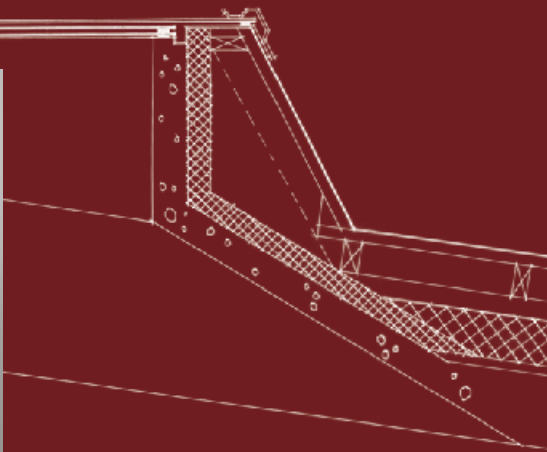
- Page from the 1975 article in *Architektura i Budownictwo* on the Rovaniemi library showing extensive analysis and drawings. © Association of Polish Architects.
- A scheme showing the chronology of publications on Aalto's architecture in Poland, showing the influence of political tendencies. © the author.

Alajärvi: Youth Association Building (1919)
 Jyväskylä: Workers' Club (1923-1925)
 Turku: Southwestern Finland Agricultural Cooperative Building (1927-28)
 Muurame: church (1927-1929)
 Viipuri: library (1927-1935)
 Turku: 700th Jubilee Exhibition pavilion (1929)
 Paimio: tuberculosis sanatorium (1929-1933)
 Paimio: sanatorium staff houses (1932-1933)
 Turku: Turun Sanomat (1930)
 Helsinki, Munkkiniemi: Aalto House (1935-1936)
 Kotka, Sunnla: factory and housing (1936-1939)
 Paris: Finnish Pavilion at Expo (1937)
 Noormarkku: Villa Mairea (1938-1939)
 Eura, Kauttua: housing (1938-1940)
 NYC: Finnish Pavilion at World's Fair (1939)
 Oslo: river planning (1943-1945)
 Vaasa: factory buildings (1943-1948)
 Karhula: factory buildings (1943-1958)
 Avesta: civic centre (1944)
 Varkaus: sawmill (1945-1949)
 Cambridge: Baker House (1947-1949)
 Säynätsalo: town hall (1949-1952)
 Copenhagen, Kongens-Lyngby: cemetery and funeral chapel (1951)
 Vienna: sports and congress hall (1952)
 Muuratsalo: Experimental House (1952-1954)
 Imatra, Vuoksenmäenka: church (1952-1957)
 Helsinki: Rautatalo (1953-1955)
 Helsinki: National Pensions Institute (1953-1956)
 Jyväskylä: main university building (1953-1957)
 Espoo, Otaniemi: main university building (1953-1967)
 Helsinki, Munkkiniemi: Studio Aalto (1955)
 Berlin, Hansaviertel: residential block (1955-1957)
 Gothenburg: town hall (1955-1957)
 Helsinki: House of Culture (1955-1958)
 Bazoches-sur-Guyonne: Maison Carré (1956-1958)
 Baghdad: art museum (1958)
 Brema, Vahr: residential block (1958)
 Seinäjoki: church (1958-1960)
 Essen: music theatre (1958-1964)
 Aalborg: museum of art (1958-1972)
 Helsinki: Enso Gutfeltz (1959-1962)
 Wolfsburg: parish (1959-1962)
 Helsinki: planning for Töölö Bay (1959-1964)
 Seinäjoki: civic centre (1959-1974)
 Wolfsburg: cultural centre (1960-1963)
 Rovaniemi: civic centre (1961-1985)
 Espoo, Tapiola: residential block (1962)
 Helsinki: Finlandia-talo (1962-1971)
 Uppsala: student housing (1963-1965)
 NYC: Kaufmann Conference Rooms (1964-1965)
 Espoo, Otaniemi: library (1964-1969)
 Jyväskylä: civic centre (1964-1982)
 Lucerne: residential block (1965-1968)
 Siena: cultural centre (1966)
 Helsinki: Academic Bookstore (1966-1969)
 Alajärvi: town hall (1966-1969)
 Riola di Vergato: church (1966-1980)
 Mount Angel: library (1967-1970)
 Lahti: church (1970)
 Shiraz: museum of modern art (1970)
 Jyväskylä: Aalto Museum (1973)



Architektura i Budownictwo, no. 09/1933
Architektura i Budownictwo, no. 09/1933
Architektura i Budownictwo, no. 10/1934
Architektura i Budownictwo, no. 02/1935
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Malarswo, rzeźba, architektura, Adam
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Aivar Asilo, Tadeusz Banucki (1980)
Aivar Asilo, Mieczysław Piprek (1987)
Architektura Finlandii, Mieczysław Piprek
(1988)

B u i l d i n g s



Julien Salabelle

Julien Salabelle is a PhD candidate at the Gerphau laboratory at the School of Architecture, Paris-la Villette. Following his graduation from the Berlin University of the Arts, he pursued a career in Mexico. A rare neurological disorder gradually limited his ability to work as an architect, prompting a transition to academic research. His work, funded by the French Ministry of Higher Education, focuses on the spatial practices of people considered to be outside the norms of health, well-being and well-behaving. His research adopts a cultural approach to disability and examines its contributions to the field of architecture. He studies processes of knowledge co- production from marginalised bodies, their emergence and dissemination, with a particular emphasis on the recognition of a cultural heritage of disability.

THE LOUIS CARRÉ HOUSE OR THE MEMORY OF FRAGILITY

Julien Salabelle

Rediscovering a heritage of disability

Mr Carré and Mr Aalto first met at the Venice Biennale in 1956. The gallery owner recounts, *"I immediately got along with him. First because he liked the same artists that I did [...] and then because he is an extremely sensitive man."*¹ Mr Carré quickly entrusted him with the project for his house. The intense correspondence that followed their meeting² recounts not only the design, construction and use of the house in Bazoches, but also the deep friendship between the two older men and their shared sensitivity. In his letters, the client subtly references his health issues, which are also evident in the technical discussions and the spatial organisation of the house.

The art dealer suffered from hip dysplasia, which affected his daily life in countless ways. The word 'disability' is not used. More than coquetry, his caution is a reflection of his era. The term was little used in France at that time and essentially referred to an inability to work. Today, disability is also a support to identity³ and culture shared by people considered to be outside the norms of health, well-being and good behaviour. The way in which Mr Carré engages with and perceives the spaces around him provides valuable insights into the lived experience of disability.

In what ways and to what extent can Maison Louis Carré be considered part of the heritage of disability? This study sets out to identify traces of cultural heritage related to disability by exploring the building's use, design, construction and interpretation through meticulous archival research.

The architecture as a memory of past spatial practices

The letters mention many health resorts. In the summer of 1963, Mr Carré wrote: *"I have already told you that the swimming pool is in working order [...] Because Bazoches is so pleasant at this time of year, we have decided not to go to Bühlerhöhe. We will stay in Bazoches for the whole of August."*⁴ In fact, the house bears a striking resemblance to a spa resort. The property offers comparable levels of comfort, amenities and proximity to nature. The water features play a central role. They are arranged around the south-facing terrace, which also serves as a solarium. The sauna was used regularly from the moment they moved in at the beginning of the

summer of 1959. The swimming pool was not completed until July 1963. Mr Carré swam almost every day. Finally, the bathroom and sunken bath with grab bars reflect Mr Carré's therapeutic needs. These spaces reflect a way of living that is specific to the experience of illness. They bear witness to daily care activities and are imbued with the memory of bodily fragility.

The bedroom also opens onto the south-facing terrace. Given its orientation, size and furnishings, including a large desk, a fireplace and a sitting area, it seems likely that this was one of Mr Carré's main living spaces. He could retreat there comfortably when tired or convalescing. He kept to the bedroom for six weeks after being discharged from hospital in 1962.⁵ He underwent further surgery in February 1967. In August of that same year, he wrote: *"As you know, my operation was a complete success, but the recovery is long. Nevertheless, I will be able to give up my crutches on 1 September. This has not prevented me from walking around the outside of the house for some time now."*⁶ The bed plays a central role. In 1960, it was moved to face the window. This prompted numerous discussions about the room's acoustic comfort and the need to extend the canvas-covered panel on the wall behind the headboard. These considerations directly reflect the architect's approach in the design of the Paimio Sanatorium.⁷

The public spaces of the house can also be interpreted in light of Mr. Carré's disability. The reception areas, the central space of the art gallery, the guest room and the appealing architecture all transform the house into a meeting place, preventing Mr Carré from having to travel too much and giving him control over his public appearances. The design of the house therefore reflects strategies for coping with the daily realities of disability. It is part of a well-oiled mechanism that incorporates professional and therapeutic practices.

Outline of the cultural heritage of disability

In an interview with Irmelin Lebeer,⁸ Mr Carré outlines the contours of a cultural heritage of disability. He explains that his interest in modern art developed after discovering the work of Toulouse-Lautrec,⁹ an artist closely associated with disability. Later, in a tribute to carpenters, he says: *"When Finns touch wood, which is a delicate and living material, they do it the same way Matisse touched a sheet of white paper [...]."*¹⁰ The reference to Matisse is significant. Mr Carré knew the artist well and exhibited his works on paper at his gallery in October 1941. Matisse was extremely weak at the time due to cancer and a serious operation. Unable to paint, he developed the technique of cutting paper. The combination of the craftsmen's expertise and the artist's technique demonstrates an awareness of the manufactur-

ing process in relation to the body. The aesthetics of construction evoke the story of the builder's body.

This awareness of the body is also reflected in the design. All the furniture, lighting, textiles and most of the accessories were designed specifically for the house. Every element was the subject of endless debate, with the dimensions of tables, seats and beds being discussed down to the last centimetre. This level of attention to design is evident in the execution. The implementation and monitoring of the work is subject to meticulous control. This sensitivity and impeccable planning mirrors, in a way, the experience of disability, which is characterised by a regime of careful consideration and the need for constant organisation in order to anticipate potential hazards in everyday life.

Referring to the numerous issues that arose after the building was completed, Mr Carré observed in September 1959: *"I understand that new houses, like children, get certain childhood diseases which they have to outgrow"*¹¹ The "health" of the house is a recurring theme in the correspondence. In many letters, the vagaries of bodies and architecture intersect to form a symbiotic relationship. Various problems arose during construction, ranging from the diameter of the chimney flues to the structure of the garage, which had to be rebuilt. The house appears as a fragile assembly of elements, all of which require care and attention. The metaphor of a living organism seems justified. Mr Carré explains: *"I wanted a house built with material that had lived."*¹² This attention to the building's fragility and the temporal depth of its materials reflects the challenge of preserving built heritage, which requires constant care.¹³

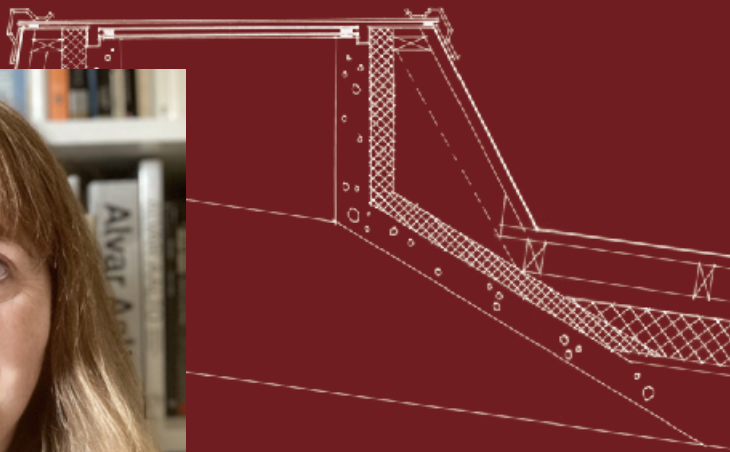
Rereading Louis Carré's archives through the lens of fragility allows us to discover alternative links between architecture and disability, providing fresh insights into built heritage. The house in Bazoches served as a container for spatial practices unique to the experience of disability. Although the depiction of fragile bodies is occasionally made explicit, it is more frequently indirectly present in the design and production processes, through the evocation of the bodies of artists and craftsmen, and in the care and attention given to the building. Viewing fragility not as an inherent characteristic, but as a shared condition¹⁴ reveals the cultural heritage of disability: a repertoire of experiential knowledge, creative ways of living and modes of attention that are often overlooked by architectural history and theory.

Endnotes

- 1 Esa Laaksonen & Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, *Alvar Aalto Architect. 20: Maison Carré, 1956–61*, (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2008), 34–35.

- 2 Collection Louis Carré, 389ap/44, «correspondance avec Alvar Aalto», National Archives, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France.
- 3 David Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes Beyond Access* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), vii-viii.
- 4 Collection Louis Carré, 389ap/44_518/1, *ibid.*
- 5 Collection Louis Carré, 389ap/44_407, *ibid.*
- 6 Collection Louis Carré, 389ap/44_623, *ibid.*
- 7 Alvar Aalto, "The Humanizing of Architecture", *The Technology Review*, November 1940, reproduced in *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt (New York: Rizzoli, 1998)
- 8 Laaksonen & Olafsdottir, *Alvar Aalto Architect. 20: Maison Carré, 1956 – 61*, 128-137.
- 9 Alexandra Courtois de Viçose, "Fragmented bodies. Ideal beauty and deformity in nineteenth-century art and science", in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Disability*, eds. Keri Watson & Timothy Hiles (New York: Routledge, 2022)
- 10 Laaksonen & Olafsdottir, *Alvar Aalto Architect. 20: Maison Carré, 1956–61*, 136.
- 11 Collection Louis Carré, 389ap/44_262, *ibid.*
- 12 Laaksonen & Olafsdottir, *Alvar Aalto Architect. 20: Maison Carré, 1956–61*, 135.
- 13 Jérôme Denis and David Pontille, *Le soin des choses: politiques de la maintenance* (Paris: la Découverte, 2022)
- 14 Fernando Domínguez Rubio "Introduction: Avowing fragility", in *Fragilities: Essays on the Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Maintenance and Repair*, eds. Fernando Domínguez Rubio et al. (Cambridge ,MA: MIT Press, 2025)

B u i l d i n g s



Rachel Simmonds

Rachel Simmonds is a Senior Lecturer in Interior, Architectural and Spatial Design in the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA), Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), at the University of Edinburgh. She trained as an architect and interior designer in Scotland and France and became a full-time academic in 2016. She currently teaches undergraduate, post-graduate and PhD students. Rachel is a trustee of Interior Educators (IE), a UK-based organization representing more than 50 higher education institutions with interiors programmes.

Her research focuses on connections between modernist architects in Scotland and the Nordic countries, particularly Finland. She has also investigated historic exhibition design and the role of photography in understanding ephemeral projects. Rachel is currently undertaking part-time PhD studies at the University of Westminster, London, investigating the role of the Aaltos' exhibitions within their wider design paradigm.

REINTERPRETING THE HOME: THE INFLUENCE OF AINO, ALVAR AND ELISSA AALTO ON THE DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE OF MORRIS AND STEEDMAN ARCHITECTS IN SCOTLAND

Rachel Simmonds

Introduction

This paper forms part of an ongoing body of research work around the influence of the Aaltos on Scottish modernist architects. It focuses on the similarities between their domestic architecture and that of the Scottish practice of Morris and Steedman Architects. For 20 years, up until the early 1970s, the latter's work included 16 private residences, the majority of which has now been listed by Historic Environment Scotland as being major or outstanding examples of the period. This paper will investigate the influence of the Aaltos' architecture on their work and also notes personal connections they had with Alvar and Elissa. These houses, whilst mostly still in existence, are in private ownership. It has therefore been necessary to rely on archive information to explore the connections between the two practices. This paper will focus on a trio of their houses, built in the 1960s, that demonstrate strong connections to the design sensibilities of Maison Carré (1956-59 and 1961-63) (Fig.1),¹ and the relation to form and materials, while influences from other Aalto buildings are also evident.

Background and Connections

James Morris (1931-2006) and Robert Steedman (1929-2026) graduated from ECA in 1955. During their studies they received a travel scholarship, which in 1953 took them to mainland Europe. During that trip they met Alvar Aalto in Zürich, as well as Siegfried Giedion and Alfred Roth.² Steedman went on to work for Roth at the start of 1954,³ during which time he often encountered Alvar. In an interview in 2017, he notes: "Aalto was a poet, Frank Lloyd Wright a poet, Mies in a different way, but Aalto made frozen music with changes in pattern and mood very sophisticated. He dropped in when he came to Zürich, quite often, and I'd make him coffee. [Those conversations] helped me all the rest of my life."⁴ In 1955 Morris and Steedman went to study at the University of Pennsylvania, where they were taught by Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn.⁵ On their return to Edinburgh in 1958 they continued the practice of Morris and Steedman Architects, which they had established in 1954 whilst still students. In 1965 Morris travelled to Finland where he met with Alvar, Elissa, and also Frederick Gutheim.⁶

Evidence of this continued connection is clear in a letter, held in the Alvar Aalto Foundation archive, to Kaarlo Leppanen of the Museum of Finnish Architecture dated 5 October 1978, from Lindsay Gordon the exhibition organizer of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). Morris was at the time the Vice Chairman of SAC, which was responsible for hosting the Aalto exhibition in Edinburgh in 1978. In the letter Gordon invites Elissa to dinner with Morris and his wife and refers to them meeting her before in Finland.⁷ Morris and Steedman retired in 2002 and the practice became known as Morris and Steedman Associates, with Steedman continuing as a consultant until his death in 2026.

The Houses

The following three detached houses by Morris and Steedman were designed in the later part of the 1960s, and all share a distinctive monopitch roofline, clearly influenced by that of Maison Carré.

The Nelson House (1965-68), located in the town of North Berwick, 44 km to the east of Edinburgh, is not a listed building. The ground floor is rectangular in plan, with a smaller first floor containing bedrooms. The resulting wedge form section is most evident in the north and south elevations (Fig. 2). The ground floor is red brick, partly incorporating a garden wall running east to west. The upper floor is painted white render. The overhang of the roof at the ground floor shelters a terrace connected to the family living spaces. Internally there is a double-height hall, from which the ground-floor rooms are accessed. This radial style plan is also evident in Maison Carré, where all the rooms are also accessed off the hall. On the first floor there is a gallery outside the bedrooms that looks down into the hall. The handrail of the staircase has a sculptural form like that in Viipuri Library (1927-1953). The massing of the Nelson House, especially around the entrance elevations, draws parallels with the elevations of the Aalto House, Helsinki (1935-36), in relation to its proportions and the contrast of materials between floors. A single entrance door in an otherwise empty façade, thus giving prominence to the entrance, is also evident in both.

The Nichol House (1966-68), located in the village of Gullane, 25 km to the east of Edinburgh, is a category B listed building. It is built on the edge of a quarry, orientated so that the mass of the building is concentrated away from the quarry's edge (Fig. 3). Internally the house is comprised of large living spaces with smaller ancillary spaces to the rear of the ground floor, and bedrooms on the first floor. Significantly, in the main living area, the timber-clad ceiling follows the monopitched roof line and then terminates in a curve (Fig. 4). This relates in form to the ceiling in the entrance hall of Maison Carré. Externally, this L-shaped house is recognizable by its

two bold white monopitched roof forms, noted as being 'most likely influenced by Alvar Aalto'.⁸ The facades contain areas in both red brick and white render, drawing parallels to the facades of the Experimental House (1952-54) and Villa Mairea (1938-39).

The Balfour House (1967-69), located in the village of Humbie, 25 km southeast of Edinburgh, is a category B listed building. This two-bay L-shaped house is more inward looking than some of the other residences. Its focus is more on its immediate garden, rather than the wider landscape, with two garden walls emphasising this enclosure. The sense of a courtyard is created by the orientation and connection between the monopitched roofs (Fig. 5). The entrance is at the low point of this junction, and its canopied form echoes those in Villa Mairea and Maison Carré. Externally, the ground floor is white render, with the upper level and roof clad in timber. Internally, the Balfour House has a first-floor gallery from which the bedrooms are accessed. Again, a striking curved ceiling is formed, this time in the double-height living space. Large low-level windows with seating in front of the main living area are similar in proportions to those we see in the Aaltos' houses, and indeed in the other two houses examined in this paper.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the exploration of these case studies, there are clear influences from the Aaltos' work on the domestic architecture of Morris and Steedman. From a review of archive drawings, both practices demonstrate a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to their buildings, with details of interior elements as critical as those for the exterior. The projects by both practices are more than just a form; there is a carefully considered dialogue between the exterior and interior, designed to understand their setting and users. Internally, both consider the division between public and private in a home in a similar manner. The use of timber, glazing, partitions and changes in level engage these buildings directly with their landscape and allow for the demarcation of functions within a more open plan layout. Monopitched sections facilitate gallery areas and double-height spaces. Externally, the use of brick and white render emphasises different volumes within the buildings. This ameliorates the end facades, which would otherwise appear as a single mass, in conflict with the elegance of the elevations embracing the wedge form. All of this is also driven by similarities in environment and climate between Finland and Scotland, resulting in a northern kinship of materials and spatial responses developed by both practices within a modernist context. It also demonstrates for Morris and Steedman a career-long admiration for the work of the Aaltos, starting from their student days and explored within their own architecture in later years.

Endnotes

- 1 David Walker, "James Morris in context", in *James Morris: Architect and Landscape Architect 1931-2006*. (Edinburgh: Royal Scottish Academy, 2007), 10.
- 2 James Morris, "Morris and Steedman 1952-2000", in Walker, *James Morris: Architect and Landscape Architect*, 14.
- 3 Robert Steedman. Report of Travel Scholarship 1953, 33. From the archive of Robert Steedman held by Morris and Steedman Associates.
- 4 Robert Steedman interviewed by Niamh Dillon, 18/07/2018, track 3. NSC Architects' lives, ref C467/140, National Sound Archive, (00:51:26) <https://sami.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiisirsil/?ps=iyQ5mp13pQ/WORKS-FILE/X/9> (accessed 06/02/2026)
- 5 Historic Environment Scotland, Dictionary of Scottish Architects (1660-1980), Robert Russell Steedman": https://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/apex/r/dsa/dsa/architects?p8_id=400367&session=3971422943033 (accessed 06.02.2026)
- 6 Eleanor Morris, "James Morris RSA RIBA FRIAS ALI: A chronology", in Walker, *James Morris: Architect and Landscape Architect*, 69-70.
- 7 Lindsay Gordon letter to Kaarlo Leppanen, Museum of Finnish Architecture, 05.10.1978. Alvar Aalto Foundation, EA6.
- 8 Unknown, "Clarity of Intent", in "*Morris and Steedman: Clarity of Intent: Early Homes 1952-1970*", https://www.morrisandstedman.com/M&SFEATURE_30_1_07.pdf (accessed 06.02.2026), 1.

Figures



1. Exterior of Maison Carré
Photo: Martti Kapanen, 1980s © Alvar Aalto Foundation



2. Exterior of the Nelson House
Photo: © Morris and Steedman Associates.



3. Exterior of the Nichol House
Photo: © Morris and Steedman Associates

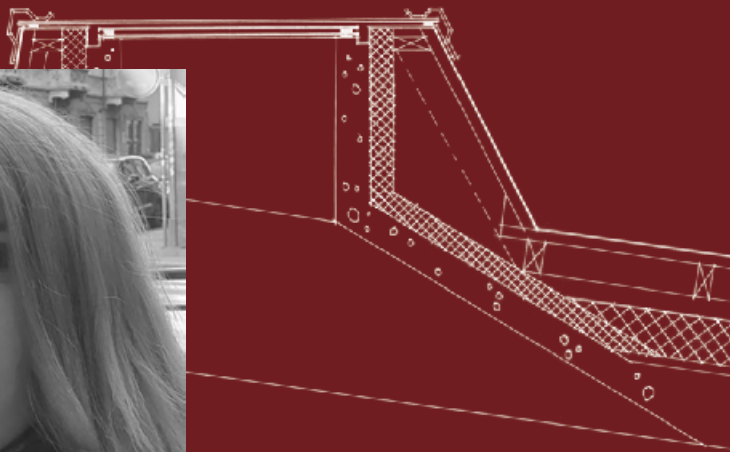


4. Interior of the Nichol House showing the curved ceiling detail
Photo: © Morris and Steedman Associates



5. Exterior of the Balfour House
Photo: © Morris and Steedman Associates

B u i l d i n g s



Sotiria Inetzi

Sotiria Inetzi is an architect-engineer (MArch, 2011), with post-graduate specialization (MSc, 2018) in research by design, accomplished at the School of Architecture of National Technical University of Athens. She is currently undertaking a PhD in the same institution. Her professional activity extends to both educational and practicing activities. In particular, she is a teaching assistant in the field of set design at Vakalo Art & Design College in Athens, while she practices architecture as a freelancer with private projects and as collaborating architect in public projects. Inetzi formerly worked as an early-stage researcher at the Centre of Applied Mathematics at the École Polytechnique (Paris) within the framework of the “OPTARCH – Optimization Driven Architectural Design of Structures” research project (HORIZON 2020- MSCA – RISE).

RE-SHAPING NARRATIVES AND THE PARADIGM SHIFT: VIIPURI LIBRARY AS A METAPHOR FOR THE LEGACY

Sotiria Inetzi

Introduction

The present article examines the overlapping narratives for Viipuri Library in relation to its established role as architectural legacy. The building is regarded as having its context reshaped from the literal to the metaphorical, with the effect of being inscribed as a synonym for the legacy. Analytically, the article seeks to explain the process of shifting contexts. From the primary framing, where use emerged as the leading context, Viipuri Library is seen as having shifted – even within its own cultural context – towards constituting a paradigm of modernism. The restoration, which was carried out after the building's longstanding abandonment, seems *a priori* to be founded not on a literal context but a metaphorical one. The physical object has been treated more as a “hallmark” than a “library”, indicating that architectural style is the context. Viipuri Library is here examined as a case study for claiming that metaphor as a narrative scheme is interrelated with the identification of a building as a paradigm shift. As Viipuri Library is traced to be configured through a multiple interchange between contextual and narrative schemes, the article aims to explore how these overlapping interpretations relate with shaping the building as a metaphor for architectural heritage.

The overlapping narratives. Legacy as the identity or the metaphor in the metaphor

In the current framework, Viipuri Library is widely named as an “undoubtedly famous library”,¹ as a “cornerstone”,² “icon”,³ or “hallmark”.⁴ It is not merely named but *identified* as such, while its *value* emerges as indisputable. Rather than being “regarded as”, the physical object is accepted “to be” an “icon” or “cornerstone”. The one-dimensional description ascertains this value and vice-versa, the ascertainment derives from this identical description. The building is comprehended as already a signifier⁵ and as already an aesthetic object.⁶ The context antecedes,⁷ and the “thing”⁸ is re-considered⁹ as a form including an aspect of symbolism.¹⁰

Any of these multiple narratives dictate its identity as a metaphor. Terms like “hallmark” or “icon” are solidified into the metaphorical components of identity and character. However, this occurs within the awareness of the restored aesthetic object.

The restoration of the formerly abandoned library is today traced as having created an *overlapping identity* onto an *a priori* aesthetic ground. The physical object has been treated more as an *endangered*¹¹ *modern*¹² than as a *library*. In essence, the architectural style and the aspect of being a monument¹³ have been indicated as forming the context, activating a co-shaping of the meaning.

An emblem has been composed, enclosing a metaphorical signified in relation to components acclaimed as being a valuable architectural legacy. The metaphorical schemes are ascertained¹⁴ as the narrative scheme in the simultaneity of the signifier and the aesthetic. The metaphor¹⁵ introduces an identity: a (former) absence of understanding¹⁶ turns into an understanding through the intermediary of the metaphor; the “problem” has already resulted in identity.¹⁷ In essence, a concurrence between metaphor¹⁸ and the signified is assumed to emerge.

Shifting contexts: From literal to figurative. The metaphor in the signified or the narration

While the building formerly thought as being “lost”¹⁹ or “forgotten architecture”²⁰ – though actually still existing, albeit not protected²¹ – was revealed globally through an outpouring of information, a metaphorical interpretation started to expand. It seems to be none other than emerging genealogies of metaphors in relation to form, materiality and the making of meaning.

Firstly, the building’s current identity is traced as having been established in a narrative which resonates as a kind of rebirth. The information around the library as a *physical object*,²² that spread out from the late 1980s and disseminated a specialized knowledge to the public,²³ turned into an opportunity for constructing the metaphor for an extraordinary artistic value. Nonetheless, the building had already within its own framework been configured as a signifier after attaining a prominence thanks to exhibitions in Paris and New York.²⁴ The reconstructed identity sought to bridge the architectural form, as hinted by Aalto – his personal metaphor for the repetition of the “known” – with the narrative of disappearance.²⁵ Here, an overlapping genealogy is added. The restoration as a process was loaded with an additional symbolism – that of recalling²⁶ distance from a monolithic repetition of any stylistic doctrine²⁷ in contextualized space.²⁸ His personal metaphor lays latent: the derived experience resonates the non-discernible²⁹ or the subtraction out of synthesis.³⁰

Thus, in relentlessly seeking meaning, the building has been transformed into a metaphor. If the repetition of the narratives is activated by the need for ascertaining the “common”,³¹ the multiple snapshots seeking to give meaning are collected as

successive present moments and form a multiple.³² The narratives are transformed to the narration of the metaphor or of the figurative context. The signified seems to have shifted the contextual load from literal to metaphorical.³³

The overlapping metaphors. Re-shaped narrative and the paradigm shift

In essence, it can here be claimed that this elaborate identity is the container of an interpretive multiplicity out of relentlessly intersecting metaphors. The metaphor for the legacy and the aesthetic object has been formed on the grounds of (a) latent singular metaphor(s) in relation to the repetition of the model.³⁴ Although being aware of his contemporary “known” model, Aalto penetrated the synthetical process with ideas that may remain latent,³⁵ effecting in a kind of infiniteness. This may be linked to a constant intent for inclusivity of both society and the individual.³⁶ In essence, it seems to be a desire for a multiply potent signified through creating a totality of the environment and embodied experience.³⁷ Space by Aalto was treated as a metaphor for sensation.³⁸ The infiniteness of forms and the endorsement of human thought³⁹ allow infinite, open-ended meanings, and the building emerges as a metaphor for a multi-layered psycho-physical environment.⁴⁰

Somehow, Aalto seems to be materializing the antecedence of a shifted model.⁴¹ Here, the building is understood as the synthesis that precedes the model and that derives from the subtraction out of anything attested.⁴² Aalto embraced a paradigm shift through his subtraction out of the “known” meaning making. Successively, the library is here regarded as the manifest of multiple metaphors⁴³ for a shifted architectural context, which affects a new conceptual coherence of conceived space. It is furthermore interpreted as the difference between the repetitions of the pre-established or anticipated.⁴⁴ All instances or metaphors evolve in a new mutual understanding⁴⁵ and allow the precedent meaning to remain active.⁴⁶ The meaning emerges as an *event* that through its multiple reappearances constitutes an unfounded multiple⁴⁷ where metaphor becomes the means towards the sought signified.

Conclusions

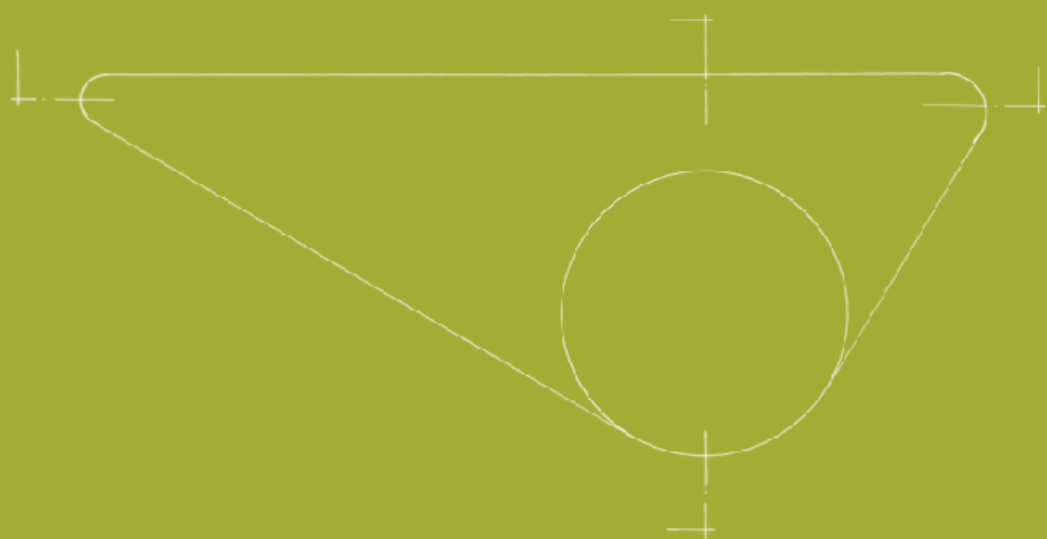
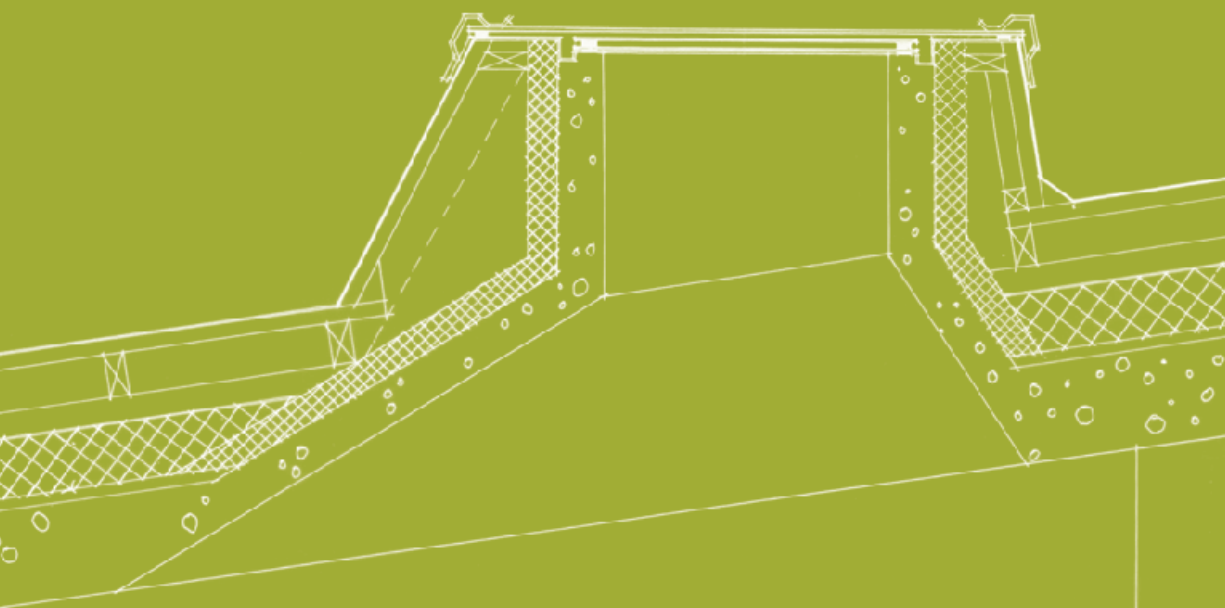
To sum up, in this article Viipuri Library is discussed as a manifest of overlapping re-shapings of its context. Over time, the building has been reshaped into an aesthetic object that resonates with its former role in a paradigm shift. At a first level, the physical object is examined as departing from the current, tangible identity. It is seen as a signifier that identifies as an aesthetic object; the building responds to an identical metaphor for the architectural legacy. At a second level, the cross-sections

of the intangible are examined. The constructed metaphor, as discussed above, has activated the reconstruction of the meaning at the same time with the re-shaping of the built environment. But at the same time, the building is seen as an infinite genealogy where the open-ended metaphors are producing the shift in meaning. At a third level, embedded in the signifier are the original, the constructed and the multiple. The event of the aesthetic is understood as a result of the multiplicity of the overlapping metaphors that seek the meaning of an initial metaphor. Anything non-discernible is being molded within the cross-sections of the multiple, uncountable metaphors, resulting in a new mutual understanding. The currently shaped contextual framework occurs as an open-ended genealogy of metaphors, which redefine the meaning of the reconstructed narrative.

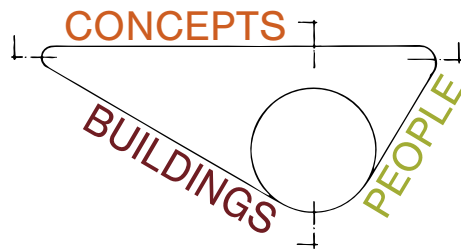
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- 2 Maija Kairamo, "The Restoration of Viipuri Library, an international pilot project", in *Heritage at Risk - Special Edition, 2006: The Soviet Heritage and Europe Modernism*, Chapter II: Heritage Saved from Risk - Case Studies from Moscow and the Former Soviet Union, ICOMOS International (Berlin: Bässler Verlag, 2007), 49.
- 3 2014 World Monuments Fund / Knoll Modernism Prize, Jury Citation, 2-4.
- 4 Ibid., 2-4.
- 5 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Transl. Chr. S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 68.
- 6 Mikel Duffrene, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 116-119.
- 7 Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 40-41.
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*. Transl. R.C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 5th ed., 1977), 160-161.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Transl. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82.
- 10 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Transl. S. F. Glaser (Michigan MI: The University of Michigan Press, 3rd ed., 2010), 99-100.
- 11 Viipuri Library was inscribed in 2000 and 2002 in the World Monuments Watch, as supported by the World Monuments Fund, in the List of the 100 most endangered monuments for 2000-2003. Finally, after the completion of the restoration project, the building was awarded the 2014 World Monuments Fund/Knoll Modernism Prize and the 2015 Europa Nostra Award.
- 12 Kairamo, "The Restoration of Viipuri Library, an international pilot project", 49.
- 13 Berger, *The Building that Disappeared*, 308-309.
- 14 Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultanéité* (Paris: Alcan, 1922), 158-159.
- 15 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we Live by* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 83.
- 16 Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*. Transl. S. Spitzer and K. Reinhard (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 118-119.
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- 18 Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean". *Critical Inquiry*, 5, no. 1 (1978), 34.
- 19 Irvine, "Harmonious Finn", 60.
- 20 Paul Wilson, "What's the Time in Vyborg? The Counter-Restoration of a Functionalist Monument", *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism*, 9, no. 2 (2012), 22-23.
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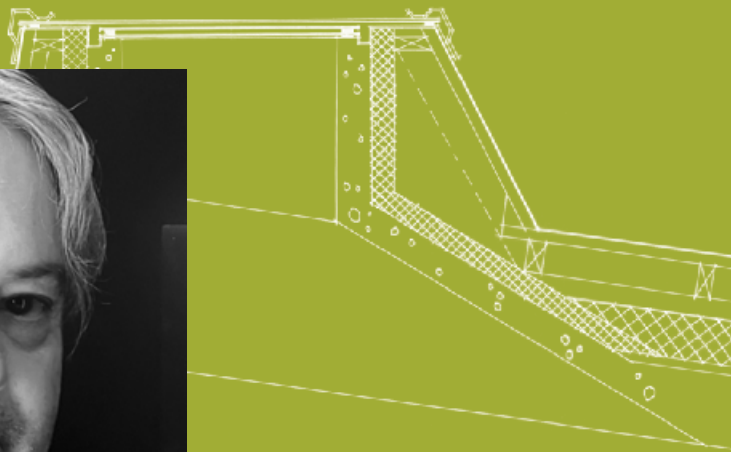


p e o p l e



RE
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PRETATION

p e o p l e



Scott Wall

Professor Scott Wall, RA, is a registered architect, author, artist, and teacher. He has taught architectural history, technology, and design at Rice, Georgia Tech, Tulane, and now at the University of Tennessee. His research and creative work centers on the study of Finnish architecture and design culture. He studies architecture broadly, as a medium transmitting cultural history through visual narratives, using text, physical and digital mapping techniques to find ways in which mapping can be used to provide ways to and graphically convey meanings of the history of the Finnish city and Finnish land. Wall was a Fulbright Fellow to Finland in 2003, studying the Finnish architectural competition, and in subsequent summers has served as the Residency Director of the University of Tennessee's College of Architecture and Design's Finland Summer Architecture Institute in Helsinki. He has attended seven of the Alvar Aalto Symposia since 2000.

CODA: THE WHITE TABLE AND THE NAME OF THE BOAT

Scott W. Wall

My task is nearly impossible: to expose and dissect some of the mythology surrounding Alvar Aalto, to debunk other myths, and to share something that doesn't water down the person that he was, or the impact that he has had on his fellow Finns, and architects and designers worldwide. These were and are his people, and, whether they liked and admired him or not, he had (and still has) a devilish way of insinuating his point of view into any discussion of architecture and design. He's everywhere. And this is a rhetorical quality more akin to the impact of Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* or Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* than of almost any contemporary architect.

What does "everywhere" in a life so complex mean? They were assistant surveyors working, sharing meals, and engaging the little monster under the white table. They were clients, journeyman assistants, and fellow professionals who worked with him. They go into the National Pensions Institute every workday. They've attended a concert in Finlandia Hall. They are old enough to remember Aalto on the 50 Finnish Mark banknote. They have authored some 1500 books and 5000 articles on Alvar Aalto. They are one of millions who have purchased an Aalto (Savoy) Vase from Iittala. Or they're blindsided and astonished when they come upon the artificial ruin of the Experimental House in the exposed rock and woods at the edge of Lake Päijänne. Like all of them, we are also party to the long track of his work.

Some loved him, many were entertained by his brash self-confidence and ability to tell a story well, and some did not like him at all — particularly those who sought to "modernize" architecture, and shape "design" to adhere to a set of limits, building standards, or systems of construction. In the end, Aalto's youthful naysayers, seduced by speed of manufacture and construction, such as Kirmo Mikkola and Juhani Pallasmaa, would begin to see merit in Aalto's view that the whole of architecture cannot be reduced to a standard or a single system of construction. Not because we don't need standards, but because even standards are approximations and can bend. And they could see that Aalto made some sense: perfection is a myth, and human error, imperfection, and happenstance carry the seeds of evolution and beauty forward.

Alvar Aalto can be seen as an open book, as his work was so very public, and he himself was a complex, enigmatic mythical figure. I choose to think that most of us

are easily read open books as much as we are enigmas. If Aalto was alive today, I hope that both of us could feel the hopeful resonance within ourselves that the images conjured by the thoughts and words of environmental writer Barry Lopez, who writes about something Aalto did well, to make observations about observations:

“Occasionally, sitting amid young trees . . . , I’d pick up some small thing, a Sitka spruce cone or the translucent wing of a dragonfly (sudenkorento), and attempt to sketch it. I failed repeatedly to create with my pencil anything worth a second look; but in that hour of drawing I would gain insight, not only into the shape of the object, but into its overall form, its third dimension. I’d grasp the temporality of it, or, on occasion, the fractal scaling of its parts, or in some other way be drawn into intimacy with it.”¹

Endnotes

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Figure



1. Alvar Aalto, Section, Muuratsalo Experimental House, 1953.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation.
Redrawn: Scott Wall

p e o p l e



Harry Charrington

Dr Harry Charrington is an architect and Professor of Architecture at the University of Westminster. He has taught and practiced in the UK and Finland. He researches the history of modernism and has published on the Aalto atelier, including the oral history *Alvar Aalto: the Mark of the Hand* (Rakennustieto 2011) with Vezio Nava, winner of the RIBA President's Medal for Research.

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BEYOND MEASURE: ALVAR AALTO AND LEONARDO MOSSO'S SITUATED ASSEMBLAGES

Harry Charrington and Roberto Bottazzi

Introduction

Leonardo Mosso (1926–2020) worked for Alvar Aalto from 1955–59. After his return to Turin, he partnered with Aalto on a number of commissions (possibly six) between 1964 and 1972. The exact authorship of these is uncertain, with work done in Helsinki and Turin, and Mosso and Aalto meeting on the latter's frequent trips to Zurich and Venice. In 1965, in collaboration with the Aalto atelier, Mosso curated the Aalto retrospective exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Afterwards, he continued to write about and curate exhibitions on Aalto, identifying the “underlying structure” in Aalto's work as going beyond “what we commonly call architecture [... a] social and cultural reaggregation of the urban texture and of the natural environment through the vehicle of communication...”¹ A reading culminating in his 1979–80 exhibition at the Alvar Aalto Museum, expanded and published as *Alvar Aalto, a systemic and structural reading* in 1981 (Fig.1).² In 1984 he founded the *Istituto Alvar Aalto* in Pino Torinese.

Architettura Programmata

Through his teaching at Turin Polytechnic and his own practice, Mosso was also one of the pioneers of what we now call computational architecture.³ His Benedetto Croce Library in Pollone (1959) recalls Aalto's work in its responsiveness to its environment and users, and its attention to natural light. However, it was his later *Chapel for the Artist's Mass* (1961–3) in Turin – which Aalto visited – that he regarded as his “first ever programmed structure [...] in a linguistic-structural sense, i.e. a system of transformations and possibilities from which infinite messages or formal configurations can be derived”. The Chapel's “*struttura-ambiente totale*” consists of a standard, repetitive, component – 50 x 50mm wooden sections – manipulated through a ‘mobile joint’ into a “constantly modifiable joining of spatial systems”.⁴ (Fig.2)

In the 1970s Mosso developed the ‘elastic joint’ that realised *Architettura Programmata*'s potential as “social communication”. The system consisted of three factors: a standard construction element (preferably off the shelf), a flexible joint capable of configuring any connection or assemblage of these elements, and a proto-algorithmic grammar which guided their logical organisation. The system was aesthetically abstract, seeking a generic functional quality to ensure flexibility and variation. The

project reached its apogee in a series of installations and dance and movement performances, such as *Red Cloud* at the Museum of the Resistance in Palazzo Carignano (1974-77). It was a variant of this that Mosso proposed to install in the foyer of Alvar and Elissa Aalto's Essen Opera House in 1987. (Fig.3)

"Conceptually and formally open to transformation", Mosso's system echoes Aalto's concrete conception of "flexible standardisation" (*joustava standardointi*) in which standard types flex according to their context.⁵ This paper argues the similarities are not coincidental. It suggests critical commonalities in Aalto and Mosso's advocacy for the use of standardised elements adapted to their unique environment and to other parts-of-the-whole, as well as their wider view of technology as a means to further individual freedom and societal transformations rather than providing fixed solutions to instrumental problems.

Flexible standardisation

As *Architettura Programmata* drew on linguistics to create a model that was both analytical and generative, flexible standardisation was morphological in conception. Aalto placed technology in the field of social ecology: "Technology must be subordinated to humanistic values which in turn are defined by man's harmonious interaction with the totality of nature".⁶ Patterns of cellular growth endowed Aalto with a 'genetic code' for the growth of forms capable of transforming themselves in their situation: "Identical cells concealing the capacity to form an astounding variety of combinations can thus produce a tremendous wealth of forms in the final product; yet these forms are all based on a specific system".⁷

Flexible standardisation operated at two scales. Firstly, that of the 'growing house' that he developed at the Bemis Laboratory at MIT in the early 1940s, and in over 2,000 emergency houses in which a component base and plan of additive 'cells' could grow adaptively over time; "...sufficient time for planning cannot be afforded to the first stage housing, but the elastic system reserves space and time for more careful solutions in the future". Secondly, as individual standardised components such as windows and doorhandles that could be assembled and adapted in place, akin to Aalto's repeated observations of how "every blossom on a spring-flowering fruit tree differs from all the others".⁸

Ferrero – standardisation and transformation

For both Aalto and Mosso, what matters is not the standard part, but how, in each unique situation, the pieces come together (we might say, how they get computed)

to form singular, responsive assemblages of concepts, objects, people and space, which possess an infinite potential for transformation. A responsive flexibility that is in itself a cultural value.

Architettura Programmata rejected the determination of a-priori forms in favour of transformational rules that would allow dynamism and participation to bypass formal preoccupations. Flexible standardisation was based on closely allied stock components capable of responding to unpredictable growth. Both were systemic but conceptually and formally open. Their structural outline did not anticipate or define form, rather it created a system for its generation and transformation in an almost unlimited number of configurations. *Architettura Programmata* and elastic consistency are, as Mosso remarked of Aalto's work, "a sector of communication conceived as an historical, social and cultural reaggregation and reappropriation..."⁹ Eschewing the modern obsession with novelty, the systems encourage "reuse in a different form"; "Structures of possibility" guided by the evolving socio-spatial ideas whose needs they fulfil.¹⁰

The project to develop a prototype office building and warehouse for Ferrero Spa (1965-70) was the second Piedmont project that Mosso collaborated on with Aalto (Fig.4), commissioned by the industrialist Michele Ferrero. The prototype was to be replicated along the autostrada of Italy and across Europe, starting with Turin and Brussels.¹¹ Conceived as an "architecture for speed" to be perceptible at 120km/h, the projects were to be "a visually discernible architecture-sign" – something that the multiple perspective studies sought to articulate. Mosso related the project to myriad earlier Aalto warehouses in Finland, describing it as part of a line of "Aaltian [*sic*] repetitive typology" and as a *Landmerkmal* or "environmental plastic sign" harking back to the advertising towers of the 1929 Turku 700 fair.¹²

The warehouse is a single clear volume allowing for maximum flexibility in the storage, movement and arrival and removal of goods. Its supporting structure consists of regularly spaced prefabricated reinforced-concrete portal frames with modular slabs in-between.¹³ Typically for an Aalto building, orientation and natural daylight are critical issues, and additional smaller elements of varying size extend the frames to support clerestory windows with sunshades on the motorway elevation, as well as offices to the rear. It is through configurations of this system that the generic warehouse is adapted to the site conditions of each individual location, as demonstrated in the stream of exploratory sectional drawings in the Centre Pompidou archive (Fig.5).

In combining their respective interests in flexibility, the Ferrero project represents Aalto and Mosso's most complete collaboration, and their most original outcome. On the one hand, the language of the project is unusually flinty in comparison to Aalto's other projects at the time, suggesting that Leonardo's role was perhaps more pronounced than in other collaborations. On the other hand, through the variable section taking on the role of the elastic joint, it shows how a set of rules can accommodate itself to almost any situation. Freed from restrictive technique, the repetitiveness of pre-fabrication becomes an instrument to be 'reused in a different form' in each situation and to implement conceptual 'structures of possibility'.

Endnotes

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Figures



1. Leonardo Mosso, Alvar Aalto Exhibition as reinstalled in Turin, 1981.



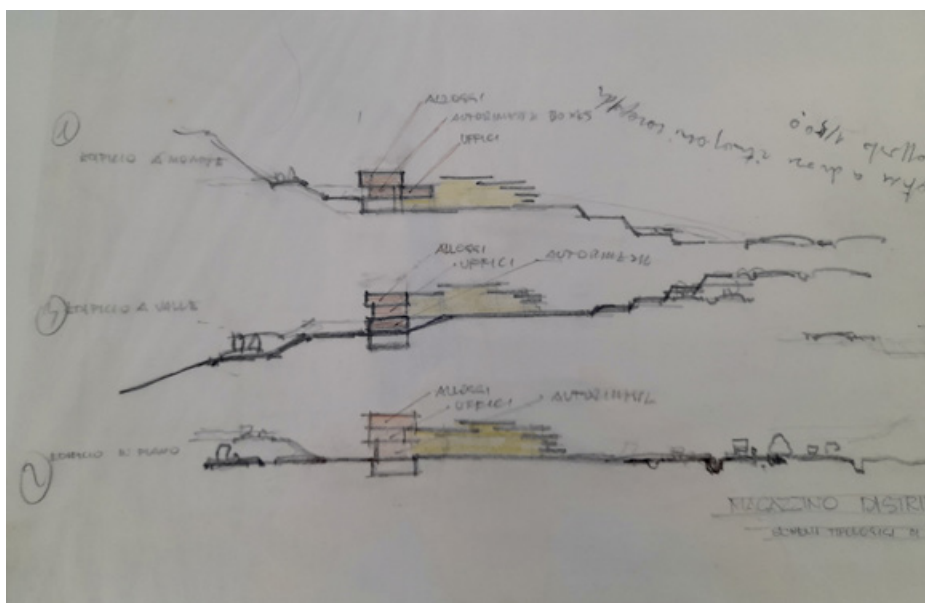
2. Leonardo Mosso, Chapel for the Artist's Mass, Turin, 1961–63.



3. Leonardo Mosso, sketch of project for an ambience structure, Essen Opera House, undated.

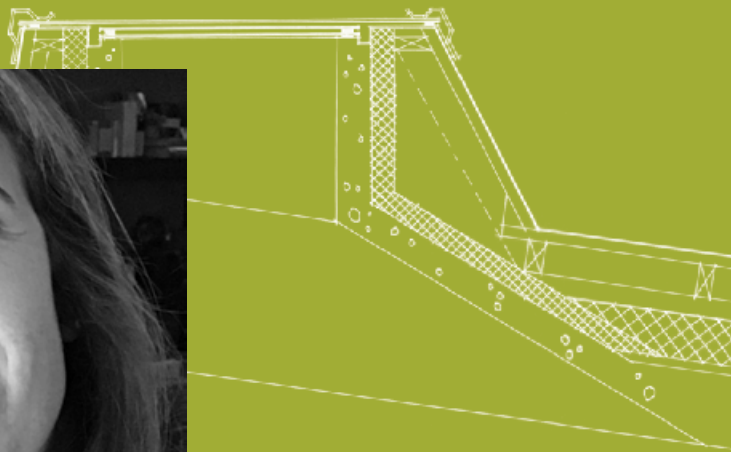


4. Alvar Aalto, Model of Prototype for a Ferrero Warehouse and Office Building.



5. Uncertain Author, Leonardo Mosso, sketch sections of the Ferrero Warehouse.

p e o p l e



Ana Isabel Costa e Silva

Ana Isabel Costa e Silva is an architect based in Oliveira de Azeméis, Portugal. She holds a Master's degree in Spatial Planning and Urban Project, and a PhD in Architecture. She teaches at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto. Alongside academia, she runs an architectural studio where she maintains an active professional practice, which began in the office of architect António Madureira, whose work included co-authored projects with Álvaro Siza.

READING AINO AALTO THROUGH LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Ana Isabel Costa e Silva

The approach established in this paper between Aino Aalto (1894-1949) and Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) is assumed as an interpretative method. Accordingly, it does not seek influences, biographical parallels, or equivalences of context. It proposes, instead, an instrumental use of the image: reading Aino through Louise functions as a lens for seeing the same object with greater sharpness, insisting that “what matters most is not the new thing we see, but what we see anew in what we had already seen.”¹

In this sense, the paper proposes a reading procedure between the series *Femme Maison* (1946-47), by Louise Bourgeois, and Aino Aalto’s authorial condition within the collaborative practice with Alvar Aalto. *Femme Maison* functions here as a critical device (and not as a theme), enabling us to think about how authorship, everyday life, and experience interlock in Aino’s work across her lifetime.

The images of *Femme Maison* that orient this text present a nude body, exposed and standing, while the head is replaced by a building, more precisely, a house with reduced openings (Fig. 1a). The operation is both simple and radical: the place where we expect to find expression, orientation, and recognition (the face) is occupied by a house. The house does not function as a backdrop; it becomes the centre of legibility of the subject. The body, however, remains exposed and vulnerable, insisting that dwelling is, before anything else, an embodied condition, an experience realised in posture, gesture, comfort, the senses, and daily repetition.

The following text is organised in three moments:

1. the invisibility of identity
2. the duality between intimacy and alienation
3. the body as an inhabited space

Four analytical levels are identified, activated by Bourgeois’s images and, with methodological caution, articulated with Aino’s condition: a) The house replaces the head and “takes charge” (to watch over, care for, safeguard) of all aspects and moments of life (the totalisation of the everyday); b) The head is inside the house

and visibility is lost because thought is converted into functionality and routine (that which is repeated every day tends not to remain in memory, exceptional aspects do); c) The exposed body as receptacle and instrument of regulation (dwelling as a somatic condition); d) The body as a device of mediation, understood as an operative figure: a way of acting between ideas and influences, between scales, between materials, between environments, between people, and between temperaments.

1) The invisibility of identity

In this first moment, “identity” is understood above all as authorial identity: what enables a contribution to be recognised, attributed, cited, and archived. In *Femme Maison*, the face is not merely hidden; it is occupied by a house. Invisibility is built through substitution: the place of recognition is absorbed by a structure. No facial attributes, like eyes, nose, mouth, are recognisable, because the house fully occupies that zone of legibility.

This image allows a useful hypothesis for thinking about co-authorship: invisibility does not necessarily derive from non-existence, but from how participation circulates as a totality and how a production, perceived as coherent, becomes publicly appropriable as a unit.

At this point, a theoretical framework on authorship becomes decisive. As Beatriz Colomina underlines, the notion of authorship in architecture has historically been constructed around the figure of the singular author, a model deeply linked to cultural structures of visibility, power, and legitimation.² Although practice is almost always collaborative, the author function tends to organise itself through readings that favour an undifferentiated unity. As Michel Foucault suggests, authorship functions as a device of discursive ordering: its simplification fixes symbolic responsibilities rather than mirroring the plurality of a situated creative process.³

This framework allows Bourgeois’s gesture to be repositioned: the house in place of the head is not only a strategy of concealment; it is also an ordering operation. The house organises the reading of the subject just as authorship organises the reading of a set of practices, decisions, and relations. When the head is replaced by a house with a classical façade (Fig.1b), the ordering is carried out through a publicly intelligible code of legitimacy: the façade operates as a mask, offering the exterior a stable form through which the whole becomes recognisable.

A second mechanism is suggested by the head “inside” the house, a domestic space (Fig.1c): what organises the everyday becomes so integrated that it ceas-

es to be recognised as decision. While life is sustained by repetition, a substantial part of Aino's professional work operates within that regime: tableware designed for stacking (Fig.2), a comfortable and resilient chair, lighting conceived to produce a welcoming environment (Fig.3a), wall materials chosen to age well and feel pleasant to the touch (Fig.3b).

"Aino brought to the shared palette the kind of qualities that Alvar lacked, notable patience and discipline. Aino's artistic talent was more reserved than Alvar's, but she had a keen ability to perceive and incorporate new perspectives and influences."⁴ The quotation is decisive because it describes an orientation towards consistency: discipline, patience, and incorporation sustain a total work and, at the same time, can lose legibility when authorial recognition condenses into the public unity of the studio name.

2) The duality between intimacy and alienation

The second moment deepens the ambivalence staged by Bourgeois's image: the house as shelter and as capsule. The house-head suggests intimacy because the interior organises life; it also suggests alienation because it occupies the place of the face and blocks the possibility of relation with the exterior and of reciprocal recognition. Here, "intimacy" designates proximity to use (interiors, objects, rhythms, habits) while "alienation" designates the mismatch between the intensity of lived experience and the way that experience is publicly narrated and legitimated.

A condition of continuity between two worlds, the personal and the professional, in Aino's life can be formulated clearly by the phrase: "The studio and the home were always connected, and the couple did not have fixed working hours (...)."⁵ This continuity can be profoundly productive, since it allows a project to arise from the everyday and to be tested within it; but it can also be alienating, precisely because everything becomes work and everything becomes interior.

The tension becomes particularly relevant when we associate Aino's work with the interior and the object. Work made on that level is where space becomes, truly, habitable. Yet what improves daily life tends to be read as support. Alienation emerges, then, when work at the level of proximity (vital to dwelling) does not find the same legibility in the public circuit of recognition, which tends to privilege a "façade form": the formally stabilised unity through which the studio presents itself.

Within this frame, Aino's importance is reinforced, not least because she was responsible for organising and driving Artek, enabling the production and circulation

of furniture and objects that clarified the studio's larger aims.⁶ In this regard, the claim that "the formal language, guided by modern influences and the use of wood as the principle material upheld the same aims and objectives as the architectural itself: taking a step back from 'pure' rationalism towards a modernism that was more organic, more human"⁷ makes clear that interior, object, and building participate in the same programme, oriented towards a modernism measurable through bodily experience and the quality of dwelling.

3) The body as an inhabited space

In *Femme Maison*, the house occupies the place of the head, but the body remains exposed. Thinking the body as support and, simultaneously, as a device of mediation allows the analysis to shift towards the conditions of sensing, which refers to the environmental and determinants of embodied experience: scale, comfort, light, materiality, temperature, tactility, and atmosphere.⁸

To design from the interior is to design for a body that regulates itself and learns through repetition. Posture in a chair, the reach of the hand (Fig.4), the temperature of a material to the touch, the ageing of wood over time, the way light rests in a space, important details. They are intrinsic to thought when thought becomes experienced, that is, when it becomes an embodied condition.

The sentences "Alvar Aalto's rise to international prominence during the 1930s was based not only on his architecture itself but also (...) upon the furniture designed to go with each respective building. These items of furniture were manufactured entirely from wood, which was considered quite revolutionary in modern design at the time"⁹ suggests that international recognition was built through an indissociable articulation between building and material culture. Furniture designed for each building does not appear as an accessory: it participates in defining the programme at the level of experience, use, and comfort. In this context, wood functions as more than a technical choice; it reorients modernism towards an organic and humanised register, where dwelling is regulated through tactility, scale, and atmosphere.

It is also here that mediation becomes legible within a dialogical axis. When Bourgeois states, "I am not looking for an identity; I have plenty of identity. (...) I am not a socially or politically oriented person; I am a person of dialogue",¹⁰ we find a vocabulary for thinking mediation as practice: producing coherence through relation and translation (Fig.5a-b.), not through isolation. Read through this lens, Aino's ability to incorporate influences can be understood as authorial competence: translating

perspectives into material and spatial decisions that hold together programme, use, comfort, scale, and atmosphere.

Conclusion

Reading Aino Aalto through *Femme Maison* allows three challenges to be articulated. In the invisibility of identity, the “head inside the house” figures a first moment in which authorship dissolves into everyday functionality and the cultural economy of memory, while the author function simplifies collaboration into a legible unity. In the duality between intimacy and alienation, the physical continuity between studio and home and the dilution of fixed working hours describe a productive yet potentially totalising intimacy, in which interior work may become backstage to public recognition. In the body as an inhabited space, the exposed body returns architecture to its foundation: dwelling as embodied experience, where scale, comfort, and materiality operate as conditions of sensing.

The articulation between Bourgeois as a “person of dialogue” and Aino as capable of perceiving and incorporating new perspectives and influences allows a transversal axis to be proposed: authorship as mediation. It is a way of recognising that a decisive part of the Modern Movement was constructed within everyday life, through the work of translating references into use, and through mediation between life and project—precisely where authorship tends, paradoxically, to become less visible.

Endnotes

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- 8 I use conditions of sensing as a working term in line with António Damásio's account of the body–mind relation: emotions involve organism-level responses, while feelings correspond to the lived experience and mapping of bodily changes. On this view, consciousness and the self are grounded in the body and in the organism's ongoing regulation of life. See Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).
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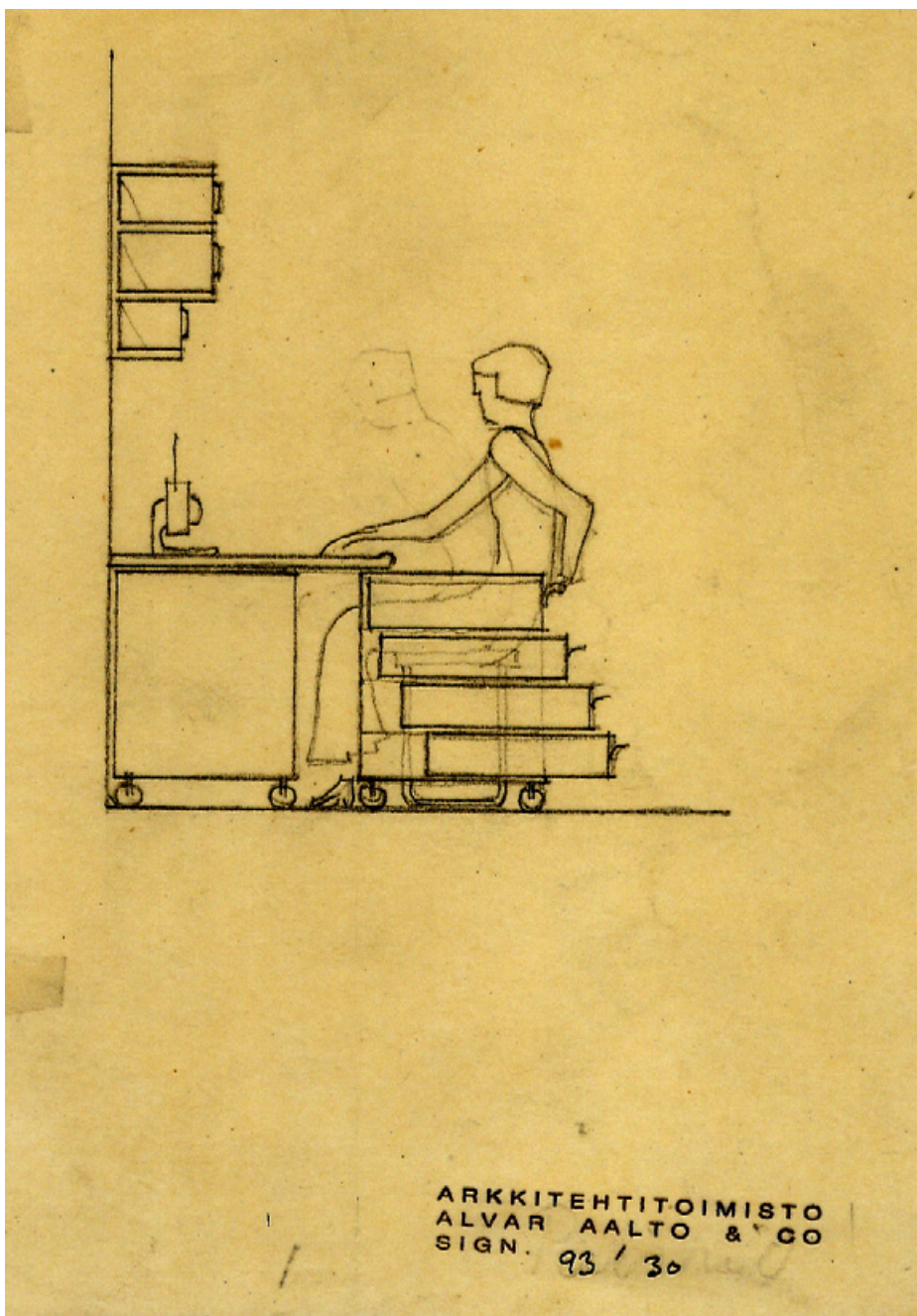
1. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison* (1946-47).
In Thomas Kellein, *Louise Bourgeois: La Famille*, p. 60.



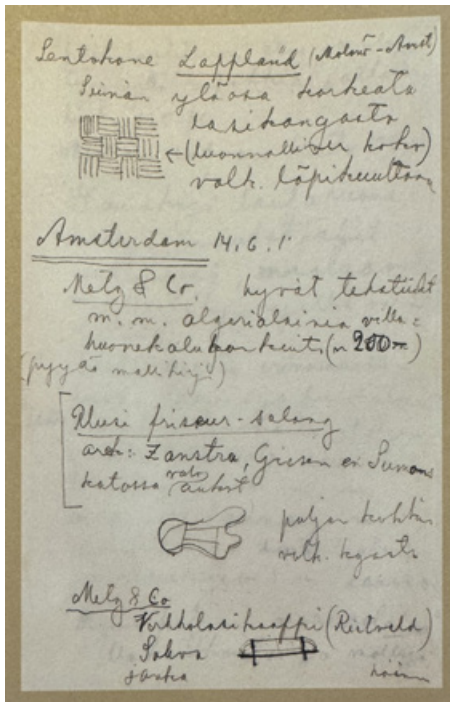
2. Riihimäki Flower, Aino and Alvar Aalto.
Photo: Maija Holma © Alvar Aalto Foundation.



3. The Aalto House in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki, Aino and Alvar Aalto.
Photos: Maija Holma © Alvar Aalto Foundation.

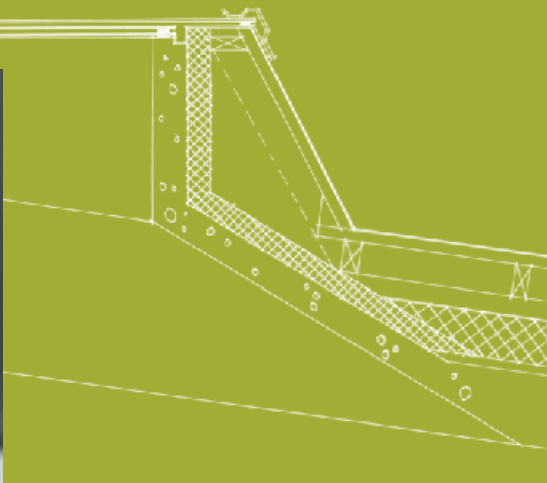


4. Sketch for a kitchen for seated use, Aino Aalto.
In Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, *Aino and Alvar Aalto – A Shared Journey.*
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5. Pages from Aino's travel diary.
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p e o p l e



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THE ARCHITECTURAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN ALVAR AALTO AND JEAN-JACQUES BARUËL

Jaime J. Ferrer Forés

Introduction

Alvar Aalto is widely recognized as one of modern architecture's preeminent figures. His work evolved from classicism through functionalism to a mature synthesis of tradition and modernity, distinguished not only by its formal and spatial achievements but also by its rigorous design processes and reflective methodology.¹ This paper examines the influence of Aalto on Danish architect Jean-Jacques Baruël (1923-2010), who was employed in Aalto's Helsinki office from 1948 to 1954, investigating in particular how Baruël's early collaboration shaped his later independent work.

Through archival research, comparative analyses of competition proposals, and a review of built works, this study traces the transmission of Aalto's concerns—sensitivity to site, integration with topography, classical order, material honesty—into Baruël's architectural vocabulary. Key case studies include the Aalborg Art Museum competition (1958-1972), the Sønderborg School (1961-1968), and Nyköping Town Hall (1960-1969). Although Baruël adopted Aalto-inspired formal and spatial strategies, he adapted them within a broader Nordic-Mediterranean tradition, resulting in an architecture that is both contextually rooted and formally rigorous.

This research contributes to understanding the mechanisms by which architectural influences are transmitted across geographies and generations. It also offers insight into the interplay between mentorship, design culture, and individual creativity in shaping human modernism.

The Nordic master and the Danish connection

Alvar Aalto stands as a paradigm of Nordic organicism, offering an architecture of humanist orientation in constant harmony with tradition and site.² Beyond Finland,³ his influence was most profound in Denmark, Portugal, and Spain.⁴ In the Danish context, Aalto's work became a vital reference for a generation of architects, including Jørn Utzon (1918-2008), Eva and Nils Koppel (1916-2006, 1914-2009), and Jean-Jacques Baruël. Baruël, who graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 1947, sought to "enter sincerely into the spirit of a master," viewing his training at Aalto's studio as the greatest privilege a novice could attain.⁵

Baruël's time in Helsinki (1948-1954) coincided with Aalto's transition from functionalist principles and his focus on major commissions like the National Pensions Institute (1953-1956) and the Technical University in Otaniemi (1953-1967). Baruël promptly developed a deep understanding of Aalto's working method, which involved seeking the functional and technical preconditions of every form before freely creating.⁶ This period forged a lifelong friendship between the two men, based on what biographer Göran Schildt described as "temperamental similarities".⁷

Early collaborations: Glostrup and the Mediterranean sensibility

The first major collaboration between Aalto and Baruël was the 1950 competition for the Glostrup City Hospital. The proposal responded to requirements for future expansion through a "mat-building" scheme, featuring multi-storey wings constructed of massive load-bearing brick walls. Architecturally, the project referenced Aalto's earlier sanatorium designs, such as Paimio, while transitioning from the classicist rigidity of the 1920s to the articulated volumes of modernism.

Aalto's deep interest in nature was often filtered through his experiences in the Mediterranean, a passion he shared with Baruël. On Aalto's recommendation, Baruël traveled to Algeria, Greece, and Italy in 1951 to study vernacular and classical forms. Baruël noted that he was not interested in architectural capitals but rather in how buildings were placed in the landscape.⁸ This sensitivity became the foundation of their 1952 proposal for the Lyngby Cemetery and Chapel, titled "Città dei morti".

In the Lyngby project, Alvar Aalto, Elissa Aalto and Baruël treated the site's existing dales as an "architectonic landscape".⁹ They integrated a system of ritual paths parallel to water channels—a romantic allegory for the "flow of life" inspired by historical traditions like the Alhambra. The proposal offered two chapel alternatives: Alternative A, which spread centrifugally into the "valley of the dead," and Alternative B, a closed, white-walled complex centered around reception courtyards that allowed for simultaneous ceremonies. Although it received only second prize, the project titled "Città dei morti" remains a masterpiece of lyrical landscape planning.

The realization of a shared vision: Aalborg Art Museum

The most significant achievement of the Aalto-Baruël partnership is the Aalborg Art Museum (1958-1972). Baruël initiated the project by visiting the site and encouraging Aalto to participate in the competition, and then executed the competition draw-

ings. The jury, which included Kay Fisker, praised the plan for its "fine details in a very personal unity full of character".¹⁰ (Fig. 1)

The building was designed in the shape of a stepped pyramid to provide a formal contrast to the wooded slopes of the surrounding valley. Central to the Aalborg design was the management of natural light, which Aalto and BaruéI famously stated was as vital to an art museum as "acoustics to a concert hall".¹¹ The exhibition spaces are grouped around a central gallery where light is managed through asymmetric skylights that provide diffuse, uniform illumination while avoiding direct sun on the artwork.¹² This project exemplifies BaruéI's ability to translate Aalto's organic principles into a "splendid experience" of geometric rigor.¹³

Independent practice: Archetypes and recurring motifs

After establishing his own office in Copenhagen in 1954, BaruéI continued to develop the architectural language he had practiced in Helsinki. His independent work is categorized by four recurring themes: light, the piazzetta, landscapes, and amphitheatres.

The concept of the piazzetta—a small square connected to a larger urban space—was the motto for BaruéI's 1956 Gold Medal-winning project for a Museum of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen.¹⁴ Inspired by Italian tradition, the piazzetta serves as an "interior landscape" that articulates the relationship between nature and the building's inner spatiality. This motif became a constant in his career, appearing in his designs for the Lyngby High School (1957) and the Sønderborg School (1961-1968).

BaruéI frequently utilized the amphitheatre as a device for gathering, a motif used by Aalto in Otaniemi. In his competition proposals for Odense High School (1960) and Stockholm University (1961), BaruéI used the terrain to frame natural gathering places, following the principle that architecture should "follow the terrain".¹⁵

Masterworks of the 1960s: Sønderborg and Nyköping

Two built works from the 1960s demonstrate BaruéI's mastery of "humanist rationalism". The Sønderborg School (1961-1968) reflects a strategy of volumetric juxtaposition similar to Aalto's Cultural Center in Wolfsburg.¹⁶ The building is understood as an assembly of parts, with the main auditorium acting as the focal point.¹⁷ (Fig. 2) Its material palette—red brick used both externally and internally—and the use of wood slats in the ceiling directly evoke Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall and the Viipuri Library (Fig. 3).

Baruël and Paul Niepoort (1922-2017) won the competition for the Nyköping Town Hall in Sweden with the motto "Capitolium" (1960-1969).¹⁸ The building features a ceremonial "promenade architecturale"—a sequence including a lobby and a grand staircase bathed in skylight that leads to the Council Chamber (Fig. 4). The chamber is a suspended volume clad in Carrara marble, providing a diagonal balance to the massive tower of the nearby St. Nicolai church.¹⁹ As noted by Leonardo Benevolo, Baruël's use of oblique angles and fragmented forms allowed the architecture to gain "warmth, richness, and kindness".²⁰ (Fig. 5)

Materiality and tectonics: A lyrical synthesis

Baruël's architecture, like Aalto's, is defined by an intense sensory experience of materials. Whether in public civic buildings or domestic spaces like Villa Voldstedlund (1962) and Villa Hertz (1985), Baruël demonstrated a brilliant synthesis of brick, tile, wood, and bronze. Baruël filtered natural forms and vernacular details to create what can be described as a "lyrical collage" of references to the Nordic environment.

For Baruël, the use of handcrafted details—from rhythmically arranged bricks to distinctive structural supports—was essential to achieving a sense of unity. This "striving for unity" ensured that his work remained an authentic development of Aalto's legacy rather than a mere imitation.

Conclusion: The continuity of a legacy

The architectural dialogue between Alvar Aalto and Jean-Jacques Baruël represents a unique bridge between Finnish organicism and Danish building culture. Baruël did not merely adopt Aalto's vocabulary; he reinterpreted and reinvented it with the nuances of his own sensibility.

Baruël's career, marked by a "lyrical and tenacious" pursuit of authentic architecture, demonstrates that Aalto's lessons are transmissible methods for creating human-centered spaces. Through their shared obsession with light, landscape, and material honesty, Aalto and Baruël created a body of work that continues to influence the search for a meaningful modernism.²¹ Their major achievements—Aalborg, Nyköping, and Sønderborg—stand as masterworks to a collaboration that transcended the master-apprentice relationship to become a true partnership in architectural poetry.²²

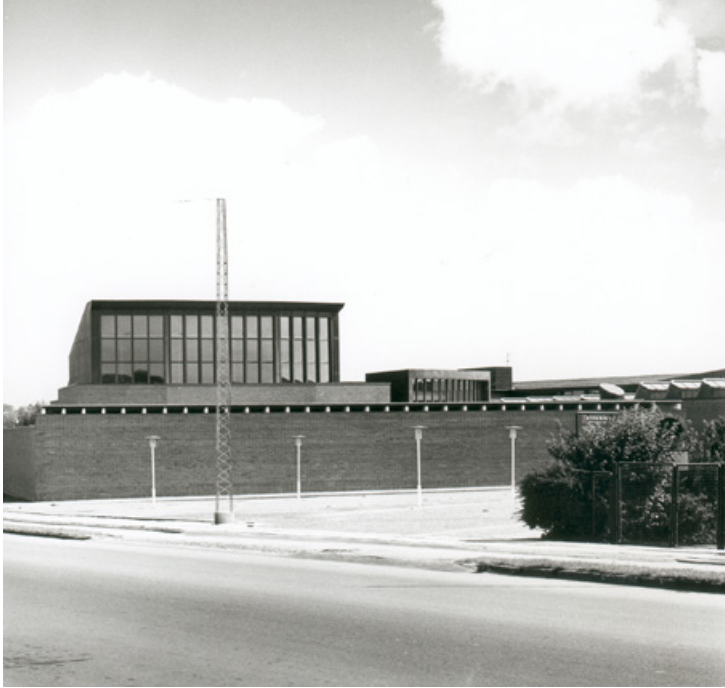
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Photo: © Jean-Jacques Barué



2. Jean-Jacques Barué.
Sønderborg School (1961-1968).
Photo: © Jean-Jacques Barué



3. Jean-Jacques Barué.
Library of the Sønderborg School (1961-1968).
Photo: © Jean-Jacques Barué

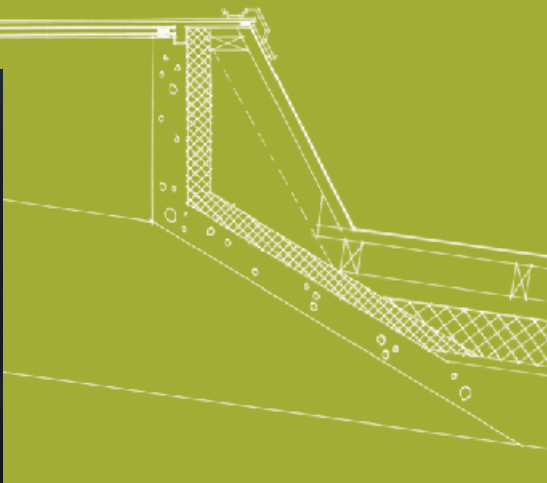


4. Jean-Jacques Barué and Paul Niepoort.
Nyköping Town Hall (1960-1969).
Photo: © Jean-Jacques Barué



5. Jean-Jacques Barué and Paul Niepoort.
Council Hall of the Nyköping Town Hall (1960-1969).
Photo: © Jean-Jacques Barué

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A MODERNIST ICON OR 'A VERY BLEAK HOUSE': PATIENTS ON THE PAIMIO SANATORIUM (1933)

Heini Hakosalo

Paimio Sanatorium is an example of a building coated with thick layers of meaning and discourses. It is not easy to find fresh perspectives on such a semantically encased building. The present paper uses patients' observations on the built environment to provide a novel vantage point. These observations stem from patient narratives, letters and diaries, in-house patient magazines and snapshot photographs. The single most important source is *Sanatorium Tradition (ST)*, a major archival collection with over 9000 pages of mainly first-hand autobiographical patient narratives and circa 1000 photographs.¹

Paimio was one of the 15 large public sanatoria opened in Finland between 1925 and 1939. In medical and administrative terms, it was one among many. In architectural terms, it overshadows all the others. A prominent theme in the abundant architectural discourse is the patient-friendliness of the building. This theme was highlighted by Aalto himself. His project report (1933), somewhat uncommonly, downplayed technical and medical aspects and focused on describing the health-enhancing qualities of the patient room.² Aalto added a new narrative layer in the mid-1950s, when he evoked the image of "the horizontal man", explaining that "The room design is determined by the depleted strength of the patient, reclining in his bed" and adding that he had been in sickbed himself when the epiphany about the need to design for horizontal rather than vertical people came to him.³ Countless commentators have taken up these themes and images and circulated them.⁴ Given that the patient-centredness of the building is so critical to its architectural fame, it is somewhat surprising that patients have in fact never been asked. Taking a step towards doing so, this paper discusses six architecture-related themes present in patient material.

Scale and proportions. The patient wing was elevated from four to six stories (seven with the rooftop terrace) during the planning stage, making Paimio the tallest sanatorium building in the country. The proportions of the building impressed patients, although not always in a positive way. They often commented on its size, especially when describing their first encounter with the building. Many contrasted the monumental scale of the building with their own modest domestic conditions and characterised the building as "vast", "huge", "grand", "handsome" and "modern". Overall, newcomers perceived the scale as an alienating and intimidating rather than a reassuring feature.

Patient room. Claims concerning Paimio's supreme patient-friendliness focus on the patient room. Upon opening, the sanatorium had 120 identical twin rooms, furnished with immovable metal-frame beds, two fixed wardrobes, a fixed desk, two fixed washbasins and a spittoon, two nightstands and a chair. The imposing washing unit signalled the high priority given to personal and hospital hygiene. (Fig. 1) But the washbasins were much criticised by patients and visitors, who likened them to "oversized egg cups"⁵ and, more commonly, urinals. Patients complained that the prominence of the washbasins made them feel as if they were living in a bathroom, which was undignified. The small size of the room and the many fixtures meant that the two beds were very close to each other, in parallel. Patient recollections show that the prolonged, enforced proximity could be very trying, especially if the roommate was very sick.

Acoustics and soundscape. Aalto highlighted patient room features – the noiseless basin, the sound-absorbing pulp wallpaper – chosen for their acoustic qualities. Patients do not comment on the patient room acoustics, but they do talk about the acoustics or the central stairwell, landings and corridors. One notes sarcastically that the acoustics were "so excellent that any sound, even a relatively small one, [...] could be heard everywhere in house, on all floors, regardless of where it originated."⁶ He is seconded by others. An auditive element absent from architectural literature but present in patient narratives is birdsong. It could be heard in the rooms and on the balconies and was perceived as a welcome, sometimes a downright healing element of the soundscape.

Circulation of air had been considered a critical issue in hospital and sanatorium planning at least since the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Aalto's plan included no mechanical ventilation, nor even ventilation shafts. One of the doctors reviewing his plan made a critical comment on this, but to no avail.⁸ Aalto could overlook the ventilation because the building was a sanatorium, which, in the 1930s, meant that most windows were open most of the time. Being cold was indeed a shared experience of sanatorium patients, and Paimio is no exception. According to a patient, the only warm place in the ward was a small room used for drying laundry. When the sanatorium was turned into a hospital in the 1970s and its windows were closed, lack of ventilation became a major issue, and the solutions adopted then have drawn much criticism.

Beauty spots. Snapshot photographs, when available in large series, indicate the specific spots that patients and staff appreciated. The two most popular places for photoshoots were the curved edge of the rooftop terrace and the round ponds of the formal garden (Figs. 2 and 3). One reason for these preferences is no doubt the

plentiful light. Contrary to appearances, the rooftop terrace is also a relatively private space. But the strong preference for these spots suggests that patients and staff also found them aesthetically pleasing and photogenic. Visually, they have things in common: their curved and circular forms stand out in the otherwise angular building, and they are both located on the boundary between the inner and the outer space, the built and the natural (if landscaped) environment.

Omissions. There are several things that patients did *not* talk about, but architects frequently do. Paimio's colour scheme is one. Colours were important to Aalto and other modernists, who believed that colours could be used to manage people's emotional and physiological states.⁹ Patients do mention colours, but in passing and in a matter-of-fact manner. Somewhat mystifyingly, several patients describe the patient room as glaringly white, whereas architectural literature stresses its carefully chosen "soothing, 'quiet, dark hues'".¹⁰ Perhaps this should be taken as a sign of the subjective character of colour perception and remembrance. One reason why patients did not marvel at the colours was that they would have been used to colourful institutions of care. White was by no means the default colour in sanatorium interiors, where different bright colours were commonly used to differentiate institutional spaces.

Paimio is famous for being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with much of the furnishings designed by Alvar and/or Aino Aalto. The only comment that I have found on an individual piece of furniture is a humorous drawing of the stackable chair designed at the beginning of the 1930s (Fig. 4). Today, the most famous of all pieces designed for Paimio is the eponymous lounge chair, made from bent and laminated black plywood. The chair is a design icon, often used as an emblem of Aalto furniture or even Finnish design in general. In architectural literature, the chair has sometimes been assigned with quasi-magical healing qualities.¹¹ These claims find no support in medical literature or contemporary sources. The original chair was very low, which made it difficult to use for weak patients, and the backrest ended well below the shoulder blades, leaving the upper body and neck without support. A 1970s medical director mentions another feature that might explain why patients do not refer to the chair: "Paimio people quickly learned to avoid the handsome chairs" because they were brittle, breaking easily.¹²

While patients' and architects' interests and views differ at many points, it should be remembered that there is no singular, uniform "patients' view". Patients' sanatorium experiences were highly varied. Some likened the sanatorium to a prison or a torture chamber, while others regarded it as a place of rest and comfort, even luxury. Much depended on their former experiences, their domestic conditions and above

all their current physical and psychological state. As philosophers of space have emphasised, space is a different thing to different people, and experienced space is embodied and situated.¹³ In this respect, the present paper is above all a cautionary tale: what an architect says about his intentions, or what a present-day visitor might experience during a site visit, does not automatically tell us anything about the way that a seriously ill patient experienced the building or was – or was not – influenced by it in the 1930s or 1950s.

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Figures



1. Paimio patient room (museum room from the 1930s), with the two washbasins and the spittoon in frontal view. Photo: Heini Hakosalo, 2024. © Heini Hakosalo



2. Paimio patients by the round pond of the formal garden, in the 1930s or 1940s. Photographer unknown. (Lasarettimuseo, Turku. The museum has altered the picture to anonymise the sitters.)

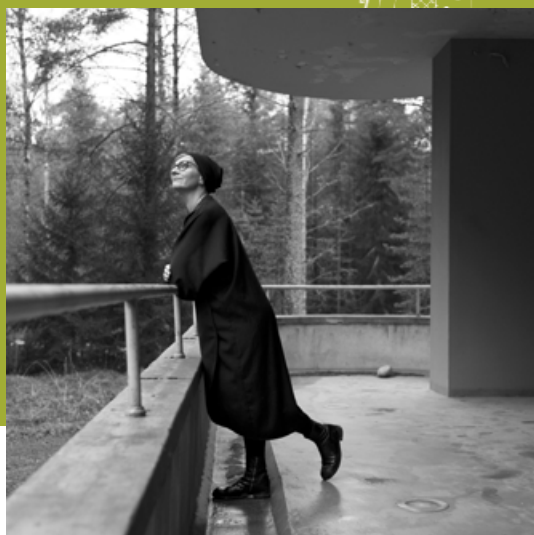


3. Paimio patients in the rooftop terrace, probably on May 1st. Photographer unknown (Lasarettimuseo, Turku. The museum has altered the picture to anonymise the sitters).



4. A drawing of the stackable chair from a patient magazine (artist unknown, from the collections of the Lasarettimuseo, Turku), and a photograph of the same chair, photographed by Soile Tirilä, 2000 (Museovirasto, Finna).

people



Ann Charlott Hästö

Ann Charlott Hästö is an architect, entrepreneur, and context-driven thinker with nearly two decades of experience leading her own architectural practice. She graduated from what is now Aalto University in Helsinki, with exchanges in Sweden and Denmark. Her learning has continued throughout her career, including a specialist qualification in Business Management and further studies in Disruptive Strategy at Harvard Business School. These experiences have deepened her understanding of organizations, leadership, and long-term value creation. Her professional path moves across scales and disciplines — from working at one of Finland's leading architectural firms to urban planning and product development within the luxury boat industry. In her own practice, she has worked on projects ranging from custom made interiors and single-family houses to industrial buildings and regional development. She operates in the intersection of project leadership, innovation, and tradition, where architecture becomes tools for translating visions into sustainable and meaningful contexts. Alongside her practice, she has taught in cultural education programs at Novia, University of Applied Sciences, and facilitated its masters program, Circular Design. Raised in Ostrobothnia, she carries a heritage of craftsmanship, resourcefulness, and closeness to nature — shaping her view of the architect's role as cultural, strategic, and deeply human. See: <https://www.architec.fi/about>

FROM HERITAGE TO HORIZON — THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

Ann Charlott Hästö

I want to start in Ostrobothnia, in the deepest forests of Kuortane. Hugo Alvar Henrik was born into a cultured and aristocratic home, an environment where life and the imagination were colourful. In his childhood home, books were read aloud for the sake of togetherness,¹ but just as much for the conversations that followed. This is where Alvar learned to reason.

His mother Selma and Mother Earth had a profound influence on Alvar's life from an early age. Selma was the embodiment of safety, and through her Alvar developed his empathy and sensitivity. Nature, and above all the forest, captivated Alvar during his many forest walks with his father Johan Henrik and later through his participation in the local hunting team.² The forest remained a lifelong source of inspiration, present both in Alvar's works and during his travels.

The Aalto family remained emotionally attached to their home region. When Alvar visited the villagers during holidays, he told stories in dialect.³ With his down-to-earth manner, he could reflect his milieu and become part of them. He displayed the same social intelligence on construction sites, as in the grand salons.

"You can take the boy out of the village, but not the village out of the boy."

"Do kan ta pojkin ur byin, men it byin ur pojkin." KAJ⁴

Thanks to his mother tongue, Finland Swedish, he quickly developed close contacts with Scandinavian colleagues after moving to Turku in 1927. Turku was logistically closer to Sweden. Via Turku, the world and the rationalist architectural language reached the Aaltos, thanks initially to their Swedish colleagues Gunnar Asplund and Sven Markelius, the latter later inviting Alvar to join the international architectural association CIAM.⁵

Alvar learned from others and developed his own solutions, often better than those of his inspirers. One reason why he had such an international influence was his collaborations with private developers and early realized projects in Finland.

Working together

"It is a joy, to be able to work together, with those with whom one belongs."

"Hä ä in lykko

tå an kan arrbeit i laag

mä tem sām an höör ihåop mää."

This is an intro of the poem "Arbeit i laag" (Working together),⁶ written in Munsala dialect by Lars Huldén, an Ostrobothnian poet with a Ph.D. and Professor Emeritus of Nordic Languages.⁷

Aalto's employees referred to the bureau as 'we.'⁸ Their positive attitude was based on Alvar's ability to see and include everyone, because he knew that he was dependent on his 'academy,' as he called the agency. It demanded skilled architects to interpret his rough sketches, sometimes in a scale of 1:200.⁹ Understandably, recruitment was careful, and the choice often fell on like-minded people. In this way, a strong team was *created*.

"In the studio, gender equality was so self-evident that it wasn't even thought of."
Jussi Rautsi¹⁰

(Fig. 1)

Today, I miss the teams behind the architecture. When projects are communicated externally with a single name, usually the head architect or agency owner, the team behind them becomes invisible. This distorts the public image and makes it difficult to understand the complexity and costs of the assignment. Is there a danger here that the architect's value will be underestimated?

Alvar became a pioneer in elevating women – a legacy from his mother, who was a pioneer of equality and women's rights.¹¹ Aino (and later Elissa) and Alvar were two individual, equal working architects. They were very modern and ahead of their time, even as an architect couple.

But. Where are female architects today? We are not visible on construction sites or in planning meetings. Even though three-quarters of architecture students are wom-

en, half of practicing architects are women, and a third of them run agencies – how are we still invisible? (Fig. 2)

”Työmaataikuri”

Aalto was a pragmatic architect who emphasised that it is through work that one learns the profession.¹² He always had a practical approach to problems and on construction sites he wanted to discuss, negotiate and invite dialogue. He often asked:

*”What’s the best way of doing this? How would you do this?”*¹³

This made him a *työmaataikuri*, a construction site magician, as former employee Jussi Rautsi described in my communication with him.

For me, this reflects a mutual professional dialogue, where the craftsman’s skills are highlighted. A co-creation where interdisciplinary knowledge and experience are woven together. Collaboration with consultant planners, contractors and suppliers should be just as natural – everyone’s expertise always enhances the quality of the projects. Tomorrow’s architects need to become more participatory, inclusive, and collaborative.

Alvar may not have had a handle on the agency’s finances, but outside the agency he was an entrepreneur and salesman like no other. He could speak the language that his receiver understood, use their vocabulary, and put their expectations and feelings into words. With his keen intuition, he knew what the situation allowed and how he could match his audience. (Fig. 3)

How can we architects talk and find a common language in the field and in the meeting rooms? If we want to be heard at the decision-making table we are the only ones who can make that change. The responsibility is ours.

What is the role of the architect?

As a practicing architect, I see the architectural profession is at a turning point. We are facing a new era with new complex challenges: technological, social and climatic. New production will decrease, while renovation will increase.

What is the role of the architect? Alvar asked himself the same question when engineers and masterbuilders began designing houses.¹⁴ I asked myself the same ques-

tion when I founded my agency in Ostrobothnia, a region with a strong engineering and entrepreneurial tradition.

Alvar saw it as the duty and responsibility of architects to take care of society so that the human aspect would not be lost, a heritage from his father and grandfather. He had a clear vision: architecture needs a diversity of expertise.¹⁵ Exactly. At the same time, I want to turn that vision and emphasize that society needs a diversity of experts, including architects, to create environments that serve the human being and the planet.

Can we as a professional group take greater and clearer responsibility not only within architecture but also in social, cultural, political, and sustainable structures? Yes, because we have the qualities and perspectives. We have the ability to see systems, wholes, and work across boundaries. This is often invisible and silent knowledge that the outside world is unaware of – to them, we are usually just the house designers.

Our professional role has gradually broadened. Behind today's architectural titles lie an increasing number of different roles. If we compare this to a parallel profession group such as the medical profession, it consists of several experts focusing on their specialized areas – cardiology, hematology, orthopedics, etc.

In other words, a lot is done that goes unnoticed – but which would have serious consequences if it were not done. We simply outperform the market. However, if the customer does not understand our performance and the breadth of what we are capable of, then there is no payer, nor is there a client.

Using a Harvard model from my education in Disruptive Strategy, I want to evaluate the overperformance. Would it be reasonable to start defining the knowledge in different expert roles and services from an integrated service profile? Making the hidden knowledge and expertise visible. Would it be reasonable to explore the possibility of moving towards a modular division of the architect role? In which specialist areas could our expertise be used more broadly, where it could create new job opportunities? This, in the long term, would lead to better visibility and value. (Fig. 4)

It is certainly time to reinterpret the role of the architect. My inner voice asks the question: How would Aino, Elissa and Alvar have acted and thought today? Maybe we could start where Alvar left off – in his later years, he used to say:

*"You can't save the world, but you can show it examples."*¹⁶

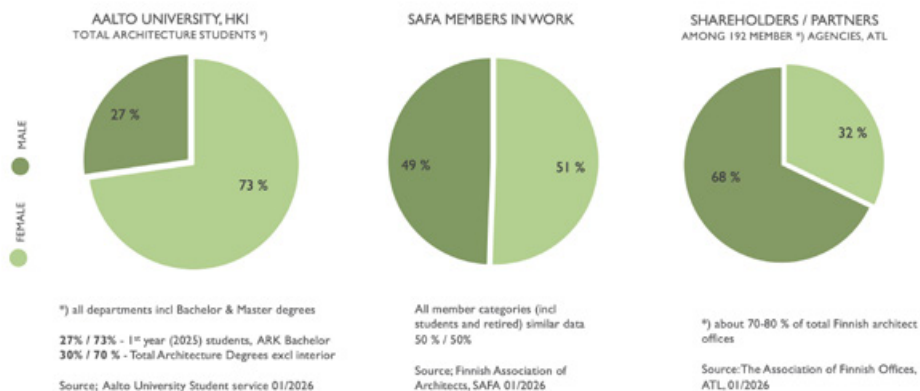
Endnotes

- 1 Schildt, Göran, *Alvar Aalto: En levnadsteckning* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007).
- 2 Knapas, Rainer, "Skogens son – Den unge Alvar Aalto", in *Alvar Aalto: Naturen som måttstock*, ed. Rainer Knapas and Tom Simons (Helsinki: Parvs, 2022).
- 3 Schildt, Göran, *Alvar Aalto: En levnadsteckning* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007).
- 4 KAJ, "Kom ti byin" (Come to the village) lyrics: <https://www.humorgruppenkaj.com/lattexter/kom-ti-byin/kom-ti-byin-lyrics> (accessed 19.1.2026). KAJ, a comedy group from Ostrobothnia, using Vörrå dialect, represented Sweden in the Eurovision Song Contest final, Switzerland, May 2025.
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- 7 Nykarlebyvyver, "Ti arbeit i laag", 2020: <https://www.nykarlebyvyver.nu/sidor/texter/poesi/lh/tiarbeit.htm> (accessed 19.1.2026)
- 8 Schildt, Göran, *Alvar Aalto: En levnadsteckning* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007).
- 9 Charrington, Harry and Nava, Vezio, *Alvar Aalto: The Mark of the Hand*. Transl. Harry Carrington, Jaana Kuorinka (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2011).
- 10 Lindh, Tommi and Rautsi, Jussi, "Elissa Aallon perintö / Elissa Aalto's legacy", in *Arkkitehti Elissa Aalto / Architect Elissa Aalto*, ed. Mia Hipeli (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation 2022).
- 11 Schildt, Göran, *Alvar Aalto: En levnadsteckning* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007).
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- 14 Schildt, Göran, *Alvar Aalto: En levnadsteckning* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.

Figures



1. Elissa Aalto at the construction site of Maison Louis Carré, together with a French worker, Madam Olga Carré and architect Marlaine Perrochet, in 9.7.1958.
Photo: Christian Leclerc?, 1958. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



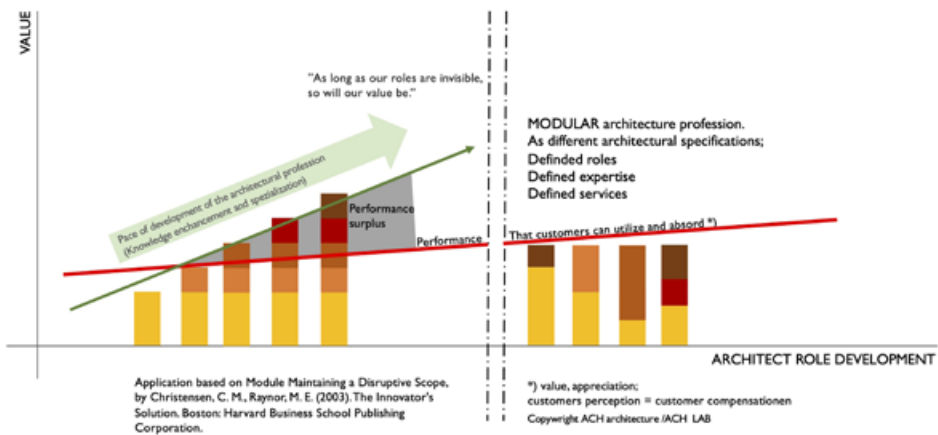
ARCHITECTS IN FINLAND – GENDER RATIO

ACH ARCHITECTURE / ACH LAB RESEARCH January 2026

- Diagram showing ratio of female architects and students in the profession.
Sources; SAFA, ATL, Aalto University 2026



- Alvar Aalto receiving guests at Tiilimäki in 1937. Alvar was adaptable, even astonishing.
Photo: Aino Aalto, 1937. © Alvar Aalto Foundation

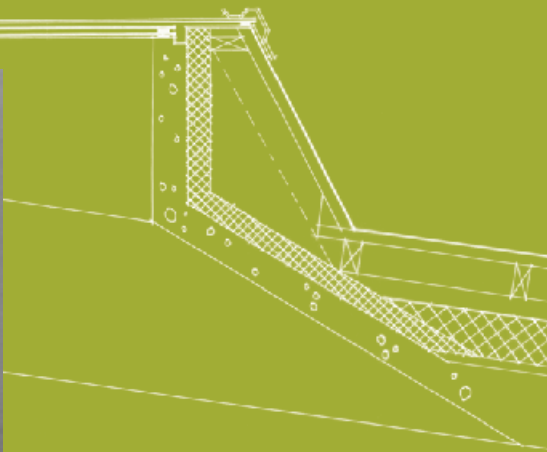


ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION – DEVELOPMENT VERSUS VALUE

ACH ARCHITECTURE / ACH LAB RESEARCH January 2026

4. Harvard Business School, Professor Clayton Christensen's model in Modularity Theory, applied and further developed by the author herself – the development of the architect's role and its value. 2026

p e o p l e



Teija Isohauta

Teija Isohauta worked in the Alvar Aalto Museum from 1986 to 2009 as curator of education in contemporary art, design and architecture. She has curated several Aalto exhibitions, including *Alvar Aalto, Architecture to Read* (2003), *Dimension on Wood* (2007), *Shifting Contours* (2009), and *Alvar Aalto – Cultivated Landscape* (2020). She is the author of *Alvar Aalto and the Art of the Landscape* (Routledge, 2022). Her recent research interest lies on the evaluation of Aalto's city image. She has been a co-partner of Periferiadesign and been teaching in Aalto University 2013-2023. Isohauta has been a member of National Board of Architecture in Finland, as well as a member of the Central Finland Arts Council. Isohauta is a founding member and first president of the organisation Playce.

PJOTR KROPOTKIN, THE EARLY INFLUENCER OF MODERN TOWN PLANNING

Teija Isohauta

“‘I’m not a communist’. ‘Well, are you a Bolshevik?’ ‘No, I’m an anarchist!’”¹ So went an exchange with Aalto during his time in the US in the 1940s.

Pjotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) was a Russian-born aristocrat. In 1871 he visited Punkaharju and Salpausselkä in Finland to study Ice Age phenomena and came to the conclusion that the ridges were created by soil transported and deposited by the melting waters of glaciers – which turned out to be a correct analysis.² For this reason, he was known of in the home of the surveyor Aalto.³

From 1876 Kropotkin was exiled for decades, mainly in Switzerland, France and England, because of his social activism. He was inspired, for example, by the “stateless socialism” of Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) and Pierre-Jospeh Proudhon (1809-1865), father of the slogan “property is theft”. Anarchists, however, approached the issue more pragmatically, emphasizing various forms of cooperation, networks of associations, the unnecessaryness of government, and the philosophy of evolution.⁴ Kropotkin has been seen as a father figure of anarchism, though the kind of anarchism he represented was not of a violent kind, as the ideology is often interpreted today.

Kropotkin’s most important book is *The Conquest of Bread*, published first in French in 1892, and in Finnish as early as 1906. *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* was published in 1899, as was *The Memories of a Revolutionist*.⁵ In his book of *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin emphasizes the importance of free time outside of work; it should be used for self-development, and education either through science or art⁶ – that is, to develop a better society.

Alvar Aalto, with the anarchist in mind, was influenced by Kropotkin via several sources. William Morris, the father of the English Arts and Crafts movement, and Kropotkin were united by their interest in arts and culture, historical village communities and the countryside.⁷ Morris described the England of the future as early as 1890 in his novel *News from Nowhere*. In it, he pictured a society centered on crafts as a way of life. Unlike Morris, Kropotkin also believed in the development of science and technology, which Aalto also emphasized. However, Aalto was neither politically active nor politically committed – his means of influencing society was

through the humanization of housing. Anarchism appealed to him as an enabler of creative design and dissent – a kind of utopia of the future.

The Garden City ideology was one kind of answer to this utopia. Both Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), the father of Garden City ideology, and the German DGG (Deutsche Gartenbau Gesellschaft (1822) with the Kampffmeyer brothers were well acquainted with Kropotkin's ideas and had been in personal contact with him.⁸ In his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) Howard noted that it was only “by a hair's breath...[that] Kropotkin, Morris and Ruskin (1819-1900) failed to give expression to the garden city idea themselves.”⁹ Howard and the DGG were impressed by Kropotkin's idea that agriculture and subsistence farming were not just a backward-looking idea of self-sufficiency, but that they took advantage of technology and connected the countryside to the city.

At the Gothenburg 300-year jubilee exhibition in 1923, Aalto saw a collection of international urban planning designs put together by architect and engineer Raymond Unwin (1863-1940), who realized Letchworth Garden City based on Howard's principles.

At the exhibition Aalto saw a wide selection of schemes for garden-city-like plans, such as New York's Central Park and also one plan from Finland, the first Riihimäki city plan from 1916 made by Harald Andersin.¹⁰ Andersin also gave a speech at the exhibition where he explained the role of Joint Stock Housing Companies in new development strategies.¹¹ The prefabricated house industry and the associated single-family housing areas were part of Aalto's design work in the 1930s and 1940s.

In his book *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (1909) Unwin showed, among other things, how smaller communities are not only better governed than cities of one million inhabitants, but that in the former the citizens have better chances to influence their own circumstances. And the same was said to apply, for instance, to schools: the size of a city is determined by the convenient walking distance to the school and playground.¹²

One of Kropotkin's followers was the American sociologist and critic Lewis Mumford (1895-1990).¹³ Architecture, according to Mumford, is a social art with a moral message: it must express the idea of a good life and ensure a theatre for realizing that idea for its inhabitants. His point of view was holistic: what matters is not the single building but architecture, the living context of buildings.¹⁴ Mumford wrote of Kropotkin's book *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899): “It is one of the most brilliant presentations of the possible changes in man's relationship to agriculture and

industry. It is the work of a scientist whose importance as both a profound thinker and a human person continues to grow - still: Sociological and economic acumen of the highest order, based on his specialized knowledge as a geographer and his noble social temperament as a leader of anarchism.”¹⁵

Mumford’s mentor, however, was the Scottish biologist, sociologist and geographer Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), who encouraged the combination of human activities in relation to regional planning. He is considered the father of community and citizen participation, the person who created the slogan “think global, act local”. He also shared views with and was influenced by anarchists – and actually met Kropotkin in person as well as Elisee Reclus (1830-1905), considered the father of eco-anarchism.¹⁶

Aalto first met Mumford at William Wurster’s office on June 1, 1939.¹⁷ Mumford’s perhaps most influential book *The Culture of Cities* speaks directly about the hell of big cities; that they are crowded giants of formlessness, where social squalor is accepted and nature is raped.¹⁸ The idea that connects Aalto and Mumford is perhaps best encapsulated in Chapter V of the book: The regional framework of civilization.¹⁹ It could be crystalized as follows: One architectural requirement is that individual buildings should never be thought of as separate units, but rather they should always be thought of and realized as part of a whole. Buildings exist in a landscape, a village or a city, they are part of the natural environment or the urban environment. They are part of the whole.

Aalto was certainly impressed after seeing Unwin’s work in the Gothenburg exhibition, after which his writings start to allude more and more to city culture. His writings reveal a curiosity about almost all phenomena in architecture, history and art. He was aware of social phenomena such as anarchism or utopian socialism, from which the Garden City idea partly emerged. It is to be assumed that somewhere there lies also the seeds for his eco-friendly thinking.

Aalto commented on the 1930 Stockholm exhibition as follows: “The exhibition wants to speak in favor of a joyful and unforced everyday life. Thus, it consistently propagates a healthy and modest lifestyle based on economic facts. We can speak of a surgery in the sense that here the appendage in which the human longing for luxury and artificial superficiality prevail is cut off.”²⁰

This interesting network created many of those ideas Aalto would repeat not only in his own texts but also from early on in his town plans: Savonmäki, Varkaus, 1937-41; Säynätsalo, 1944-; Imatra forest town, with its three centres, 1949; and the

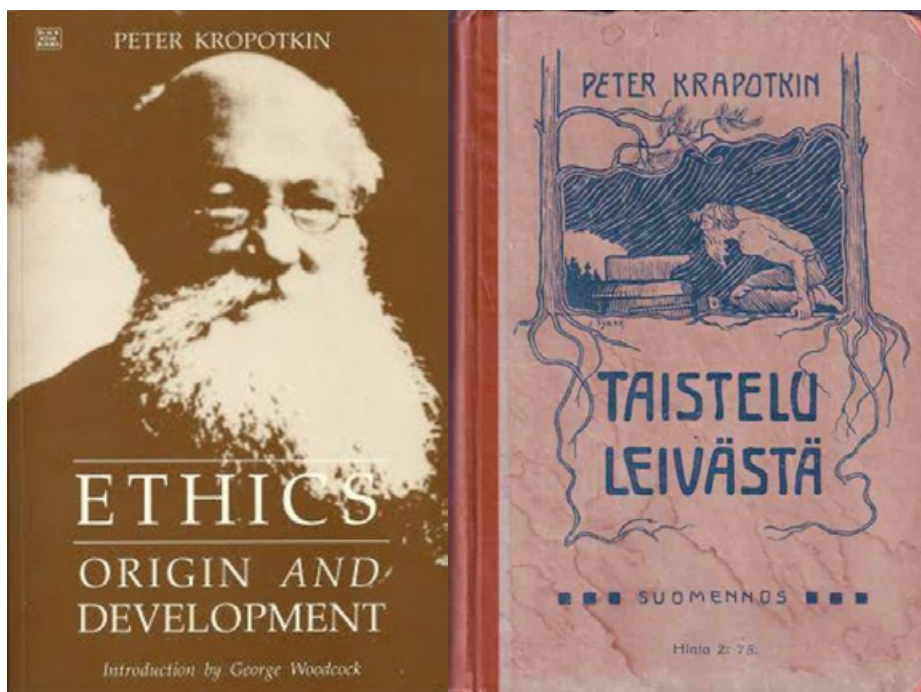
Lapland regional plan, 1950-57. With his town plans, Aalto aimed to enable happy lives for people.

Endnotes

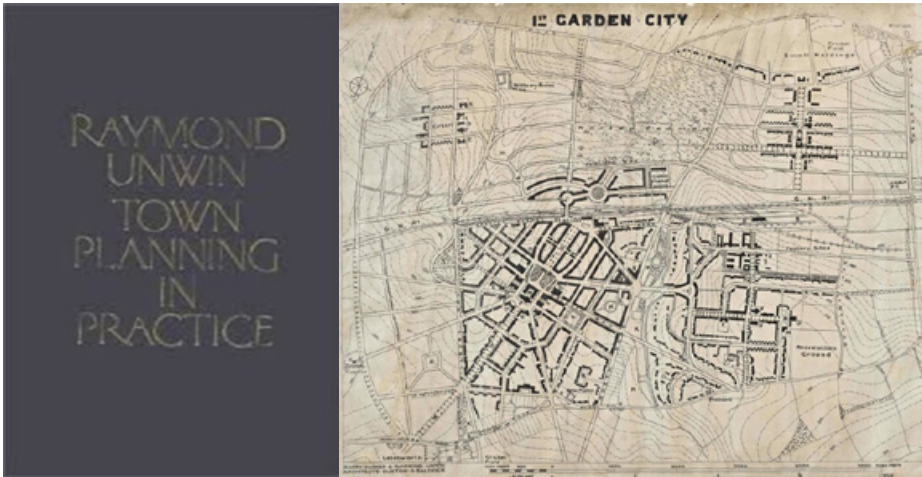
- 1 Harry Charrington and Vezio Nava, *Alvar Aalto: The Mark of the Hand* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto 2011), Interview 3 with Veli Paatela, 133; Göran Schildt has also mentioned Kropotkin in his first Aalto book: Göran Schildt, *Valkoinen Pöytä - Alvar Aallon nuoruus ja taiteelliset perusideat* (Helsinki: Otava 1982). In his interpretation, Aalto was more interested in Kropotkin as a character than in his ideals.
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- 6 Marshall Shatz, *Peter Kropotkin: The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93-97.
- 7 Ruth Kinna, foreword to Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: An illuminated Factor of Evolution* (New York: PM Press, 2021). Kropotkin agreed to give six lectures to William Morris's Socialist Society in Hammersmith in 1899. The lectures were not given, but it showed that these two men knew each other and their visions. Kropotkin also published Morris's obituary in *Freedom*, Vol X. No 110, November 1896.
- 8 Robert Beever, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 17. Bernhard Kampffmeyer, one of the founders of DGG, published a German translation of Kropotkin's book *Die Eroberung des Brotes* in 1919. His grandson, Thomas Kampffmeyer, states that Hans knew Kropotkin personally while in Paris.
- 9 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities for To-morrow* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1898). Pat Simpson, "Prince Peter Kropotkin: Anarchism, Eugenics and the Utopian ideal of Letchworth Garden City." Paper presented at *Utopia! Experiments in Perfection*, Letchworth Garden City, UK, 12 November, 2015: <https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/id/eprint/15094/> (accessed 10.3.2026). John Ruskin made his career as an art historian but in his later career became interested in social issues and his thoughts, including those about nature, gave inspiration to the Garden City movement. See, for example: Stuart Eagles, "Ruskin & the Garden City Movement: I. Ebenezer Howard & the Founding Gospel", March 2024: <https://stuarteagles.co.uk/37-ruskin-the-garden-city-movement-ebenezer-howard/> (accessed 10.3.2026)
- 10 Harald Andersin (1883-1936) was an architect who had studied in Dresden and been familiar with the ideas of DGG.
- 11 International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation, *Report of Gothenburg Conference*, 1923 (London, 1923), 8.
- 12 Raymond Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (London: Longmans Green, 1909), 27, 116. See also Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1938), in which he quotes Unwin a lot.
- 13 J.L. Thomas, "Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKaye, and the regional vision", in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual*, ed. Th. P. Hughes and A.C. Hughes (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1990; Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 66-99. Mumford served as the architecture critic for the *New Yorker* magazine and was one of the founders of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA).
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- 17 The meeting was held during Aalto's visit to the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939. Mumford's name is mentioned in the contacts held at the Aalto office under "The School of Social Progress", Alvar Aalto Foundation.
- 18 Mumford himself lived his entire life in the small town of Amenia, New York State, with a population of 3,500.
- 19 Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 300-342. The book was published in Finnish in 1949.
- 20 Alvar Aalto, "The Stockholm Exhibition", *Åbo Underrättelser*, May 22, 1930. Reproduced in Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in his own Words*, 71.

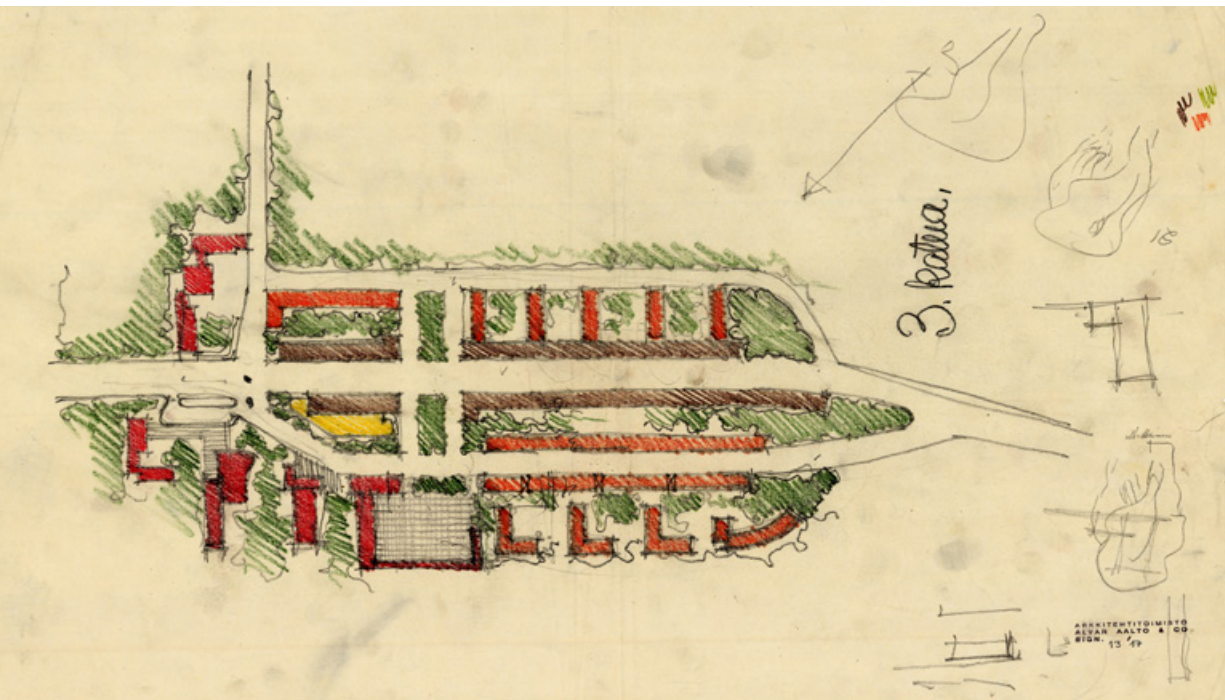
Figures



1. Pjotr Kropotkin, 1842-1921. His first important book was *La Conquête du Pain*, 1892. Finnish translation by *Taistelu leivästä*, 1906. English translation, partly by Kropotkin himself, 1907.



2. Raymond Unwin's book *Town Planning in Practice: An Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (1909). The book, contained, for example, the plan for Letchworth Garden City by him and Barry Parker from 1903. Cornell University Library, Digital Collections: <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:575323> (accessed 10.3.2026)



3. Savonmäki plan, Varkaus, 1937-41
© Alvar Aalto Foundation



4. Plan for Säynätsalo, starting 1944.
© Alvar Aalto Foundation

5. Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), sociologist and architectural influencer shared his views on urban planning in his articles for the *New York Times* and in his books. His book *The Culture of The Cities*, first published in 1938, came out in a Finnish translation, *Kaupunkikulttuuri*, in 1949. © Time USA: <https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19380418,00.html> (accessed 10.3.2026)



people



Oskari Luoma & Aatu Kavalto

Oskari Luoma works at the Aalto2 Museum Centre as a customer service representative and guide. His connection to Alajärvi stems from his previous work as a museum educator at the Alajärvi Art Museum, also known as the Nelimarkka Museum. It was from there that the "Aallot Alajärvellä" book project, to which the authors' research seminar article relates, was launched in collaboration with local actives. Luoma has long been interested in the connection between Aalto's architecture, cultural history and the lives of local communities. A particularly special area for him is the Seminaarinmäki area in Jyväskylä, where he attended the Aalto elementary school in the 1990s and later roamed the area as a history student at the University of Jyväskylä.

Aatu Kavalto is an architectural history guide and architecture enthusiast. He wrote his master's thesis (MA in History, University of Jyväskylä) on tuberculosis treatment in Finland in the 1930s, using Paimio Sanatorium as an example of the modern discourse found in the Finnish sanatorium system. He has guided tours in the University of Jyväskylä campus in Seminaarinmäki, Muuratsalo Experimental House and Paimio Sanatorium, forming a deep connection to these sites and the values they represent. Kavalto works with Oskari Luoma and the talented group of writers in the "Aallot Alajärvellä" book project, writing an article about the Alajärvi municipal hospital that Alvar Aalto designed in the 1920s. In the article for this publication, and more broadly in the book project, the main interest is in the theme of locality in Aalto architecture – not only Alvar Aalto's titular work but expanding to the architects working in the Aalto office through the decades.

AALTO AND THE PEOPLE OF ALAJÄRVI: A CENTURY OF ORAL HISTORY AND LOCALITY

Oskari Luoma and Aatu Kavalto

The ongoing book project *Aallot Alajärvellä* (translated as *Aalto Buildings in Alajärvi* and also *The Aalto Family in Alajärvi*) examines the significance of Alajärvi, a town and a municipality in the South Ostrobothnia region of Finland, for Aalto architecture through both a long, 100-year perspective and a very concrete and precise focus on everyday life. In this paper we demonstrate the multidimensional ways in which Alajärvi has been present in Aalto architecture from its inception in the 1910s until the closure of the office in the early 1990s. Our analysis focuses on the mutual relationship between Aalto architecture and the Aalto family with the people and communities of the Alajärvi region.

Over the period of almost a century, Aalto's office created a one-of-a-kind townscape in Alajärvi. Consisting of mostly public spaces, the Aalto architecture in Alajärvi clusters around the municipal church (the Church of Gabriel), designed by the 19th century architect C.L. Engel, providing spaces for community decision-making, care, education, and remembrance, among others. These spaces are largely still in use and, through their functions, have influenced local history and mentalities during and after Aalto's lifetime. A critical primary source for the project is collections of interviews conducted with Alajärvi locals over multiple decades. The interviewees include the occupants and employees of these public spaces, their builders, political decision-makers, and the neighbors of the Aalto family in Alajärvi. The present paper aims to assess how to approach this important type of primary source within the context of architecture and Aalto research. Does the oral history in these interviews tell us more about the impact of Aalto (the architect, his buildings and his family members) in Alajärvi or vice versa?

The Aaltos in Alajärvi

"Aalto arrived here -- He started walking towards the youth association building and stopped there, and after circling for a while and looking at the old building to see what condition it was in, he started walking from the road towards the church. We then tried with (municipal manager Jaakko) Heinilä to showcase this area a bit, but he said, 'don't you boys say a word, for I know every stone and stump here better than you' -- Heinilä said that since we don't have a restaurant in town we have to go to Salo house to eat, Aalto said at once: 'When can we get there to eat that good food of Fanni Salo's'".¹

The significance of Alajärvi for Aalto architecture is manifested in several ways, whether examining the Aalto family's residence and work in the region or studying the architectural sites. Over the 20th century, Alajärvi directly connects to four generations of the Aalto family.

The first generation consisted of Alvar's father Johan Aalto (1869–1940), his first wife Selma “Selly” Aalto (née Hackstedt) (1867–1906), his second wife and Selma's sister Flora Aalto (1871–1957) and their siblings. Johan worked as a land surveyor specifically in the Alajärvi region beginning in 1898. First he conducted his work from the nearby town of Kuortane, then the city of Jyväskylä, until the entire family moved to Alajärvi in 1918. Predating their move to the town, the family had already spent many summers in the Rottala estate near Alajärvi to ease Johans fieldwork.

The second generation centered around the Aalto siblings – Alvar, Väinö, Einar, and Selma – who were all born in Kuortane between 1898–1903, and Aino Aalto (née Marsio) (1894–1949). The other Aalto siblings had a more inconsistent relationship with Alajärvi later in their lives, but Väinö Aalto continued his father's profession in Alajärvi (his family lived in a house Aalto designed) until the late 1940s.

The third generation, the children of the original Aalto siblings born in the 1920s, spent their childhood holidays in Alajärvi as the family kept in touch through visits to the area. This generation includes Alvar's nephew Heikki Tarkka (1929–2017) who worked in Aalto's office beginning in the 1950s, and Alvar's second wife Elissa Aalto (née Mäkinie) (1922–1994).

The current fourth generation remain connected to Alajärvi especially through Villa Flora. The family's residency in Alajärvi ended in the 1950s with Flora Aalto's death, after which Alvar designed the family gravesite in the Alajärvi churchyard.

The Aalto family left a significant mark on the local community through their work, various positions of trust, and community activity, which will be more thoroughly examined in the upcoming book.

In examining Aalto's architecture in Alajärvi, three distinct periods emerge. Between 1918–1928, Villa Väinölä and Villa Flora were designed for the family's personal use, as well as the Youth Association Building, Municipal Hospital, and the 1918 Monument as communal spaces. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Aalto Center was completed with the Municipal Hall, Parish Centre, and Health Centre. Additionally, the war cemetery area was expanded and Hamilkar Aalto (Alvar's son), working

as an electrical engineer, designed a power plant for a local river near the Rottala residence. The last period of activity falls in the 1980s and 1990s, where under the leadership of Elissa Aalto and Heikki Tarkka, the Aalto office complemented the Centre Plan with a library and carried out an extensive restoration for the Youth Society Building.

From Historical Awareness to Experienced Space

While architecture, family residency, and various public positions are the marks that the Aalto family left behind in historical documents, the cultural and emotional ties often remain hidden. For instance, Väinö Aalto's spouse, Toini, was the daughter of the local vicar; Alvar's family was much liked by their neighbors next to Villa Flora; Johan Aalto spent evenings with the local pharmacist named Asplund and others. Art historian Timo Koho has characterized Aalto's modernism as culture-bound, historically conscious architecture that creates "stages for Finnish way of life".² Is it worth approaching Aalto's architecture and the "Aalto style" through a local connectivity and try to assess how much they are about adapting to existing conditions versus creating something entirely new?

Does Aalto architecture end at the building's completion? Art historian Kirsi Saarikangas has highlighted how the use of built space and the meanings derived from it are often overlooked. She describes "lived in space" as something that takes shape through the interaction of private, communal, and historical layers of meaning, where all bodily and psychological sensations affect the experience of space. Shared culture is created when these sensations are shared with other people. She argues that this continuous process of "cultural renewal" is largely subliminal.³ In this view, architecture possesses social power, as architectural spaces seem to try to support people's psychological needs and grant agency to users. Flexibility was built into the process; from Alvar Aalto's initial sketches, the office's project architects continued the work, often incorporating changes requested by local decision-makers or future users. Because quick, intuitive solutions were made based on local needs throughout the design and construction phases, the creation of architecture can be argued to continue into the actual use of the spaces. Aalto architecture in Alajärvi derives much of its significance from this lived everyday life.

The *Aaltos in Alajärvi* project utilizes a sample of about one hundred recordings from the 1950s to the present day, including individual and group interviews as well as community reminiscence evenings. The oldest group comprises a folklore collection carried out in Alajärvi during the 1950s–1980s. From these, we primarily gain indirect information about the Aalto architecture, as the tapes discuss, for example,

conditions at the Alajärvi hospital or the activities of the Youth Society. The second interview category consists of systematic Aalto heritage interviews conducted in the 1990s under the leadership of the city's cultural secretary. These tapes delve directly into Aalto spaces and the Aaltos as a family; for instance, local decision-makers are heard. In the on-going interviews for the *Aallot Alajärvellä* project, the focus is on employees that have worked in Aalto buildings and other contemporary inhabitants of the spaces.

“The Aalto-label”

Which questions should we pose to our extensive oral history sources? We have established many limitations within this article, such as focusing on Aalto's public spaces and delving into only one source category; however, in the *Aallot Alajärvellä* project, various source types will be used comprehensively to form a clearer picture. It is also important to add that we have so far only scratched the surface of the extent of the oral history material available.

Based on our findings, the special features of Alajärvi for Aalto architecture are, above all, the temporal duration and the organic growth of the spaces as a part of the life of the local community. From recordings spanning multiple decades, we seek to explore the community's relationship with Aalto spaces, both conscious and unconscious. The intonations, pauses, hesitations, and various emotional states conveyed on the tapes offer a closer examination of community mentalities – they are the echoes of the community arising from behind individual expression.⁴ The relationship of the local community to Aalto is not as simple as it first seems.

The interviewees do not seem to consider the “Aalto label” when discussing Aalto spaces; however, they enjoy reminiscing about the personalities of the Aalto family and various incidents and flamboyant stories about them. Locals do not highlight the Aalto centre, instead they focus on speaking more precisely about different buildings and the activities within buildings they have a personal connection with. Integrated architecture like the Aalto centre seems foreign to the community's history, except perhaps in relation to the freely formed town plan and the mentally dominant church. It is precisely to this continuum that the Aalto centre in Alajärvi seems to be linked. It represents one central, though still largely unconscious, continuum of the local community's 20th-century mentalities, appearing alongside significant historical experiences such as migration waves, the world wars and the rapid industrialization in the 20th century. This is also evident in the Ruralia Institute's reminiscence workshops in Alajärvi,⁵ where Aalto spaces are frequently referred to—either with or without the “Aalto label”—whenever the discussion focused on the home region in general.

It appears that, at least in lived experience, the Aalto architecture in Alajärvi converges with the multigenerational history of the region and the experienced continuum of Finnish history. The Alajärvi Aalto Centre is not only a monument of modernism or the vision of a master architect, but for the community, something more malleable, divisive and subject to continuous reinterpretation.

Endnotes

- 1 Original quote in Finnish: *"Aalto tuli tänne - - Se lähti kävelemään nuorisoseuran taloa kohti ja siellä se pysähtyi ja kun oli vähän kierrellyt ja katellut vanhaa nuorisoseuran taloa, missä kunnossa se on, lähti sieltä tieltä kävelemään kohti kirkkoa. Me koitettiin sitten (kunnanjohtaja Jaakko) Heinilän kanssa siellä vähän esitellä tätä aluetta ni sano, että elekkää te pojat puhuko mittää että minä tunnen paremmin nämä täällä joka kiven ja kannon - - Heinilä sano, jotta kun meillä ei ole ravintolaa, että me jouvutaan Saloon syömään niin Aalto sano het että koska me sinne päästään syömään sitä Salon Fannin hyvää ruokaa."* Interview of Olavi Sippola, 15.7.1998, interviewer Liisa Heinilä. Translated by Aatu Kavalto.
- 2 Timo Koho, *Alvar Aalto: Muutoksen Etsijä* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 1998), 123-126.
- 3 Kirsi Saarikangas, "Aistittavaa arkkitehtuuria?: rakennetun tilan ja tilankäytön kohtaamisista", *Sukupuolentutkimus-Genusforskning*, Vol. 14, no. 4 (2001), 61-65.
- 4 Alessandro Portelli, "Mikä Tekee Muistitietotutkimuksesta Erityisen?", in *Muistitietotutkimus: Metodologisia Kysymyksiä*, ed. Outi Fingerroos, Riina Haanpää, Anne Heimo, and Ulla-Maija Peltonen (Helsinki: SKS Finnish Literature Society, 2006), 50-53.
- 5 Timo Suutari (ed.), *Kotiseutua Kokemassa: Kotiseutukokemuksia Järviseudulta* (University of Helsinki, Ruralia-institute, 2018).

Figures



1. Late 1920s beach life in Villa Flora. Adults from the left: Flora Aalto, Aino Aalto, probably Selma Aalto, J. H. Aalto and probably the family maid Helmi. Young children in the front, probably Johanna and Hamilkar Aalto.
Photo: Alvar Aalto, 1930-34. © Alvar Aalto-foundation

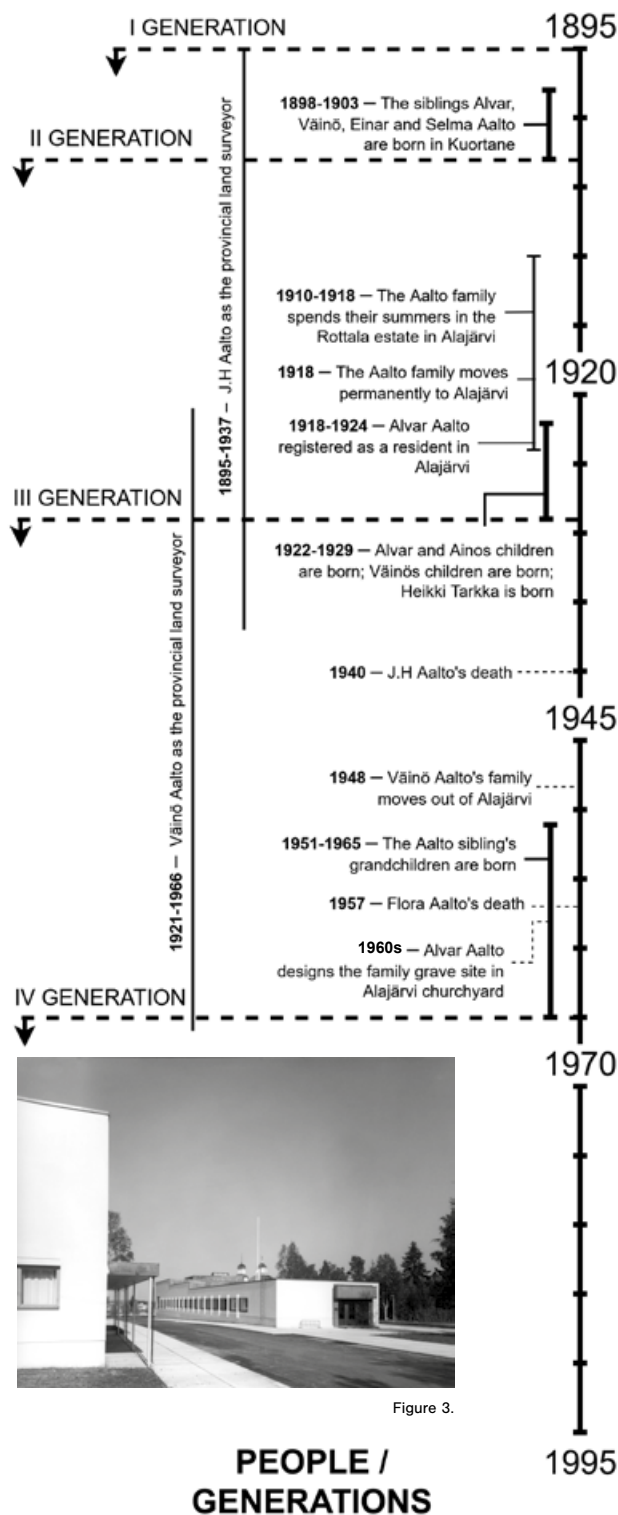


Figure 1.

1919-1920 — Youth association building; the 1918 monument

1924-1928 — Villa Väinölä; Villa Flora; Alajärvi hospital



Figure 2.

1955-1956 — WW2 memorial addition to the 1918 monument

1958-1962 — Hamilkar Aalto head engineer and designer for a hydroelectric plant in Alajärvi

1965-1970 — First phase of the Alajärvi municipal centre project; municipal hall, health centre and the parish centre are finished

1984-1991 — The youth association building burns and is subsequently rebuilt/renovated; second wave of the municipal centre, the municipal library is finished in 1991



Figure 3.

BUILDINGS / PROJECTS

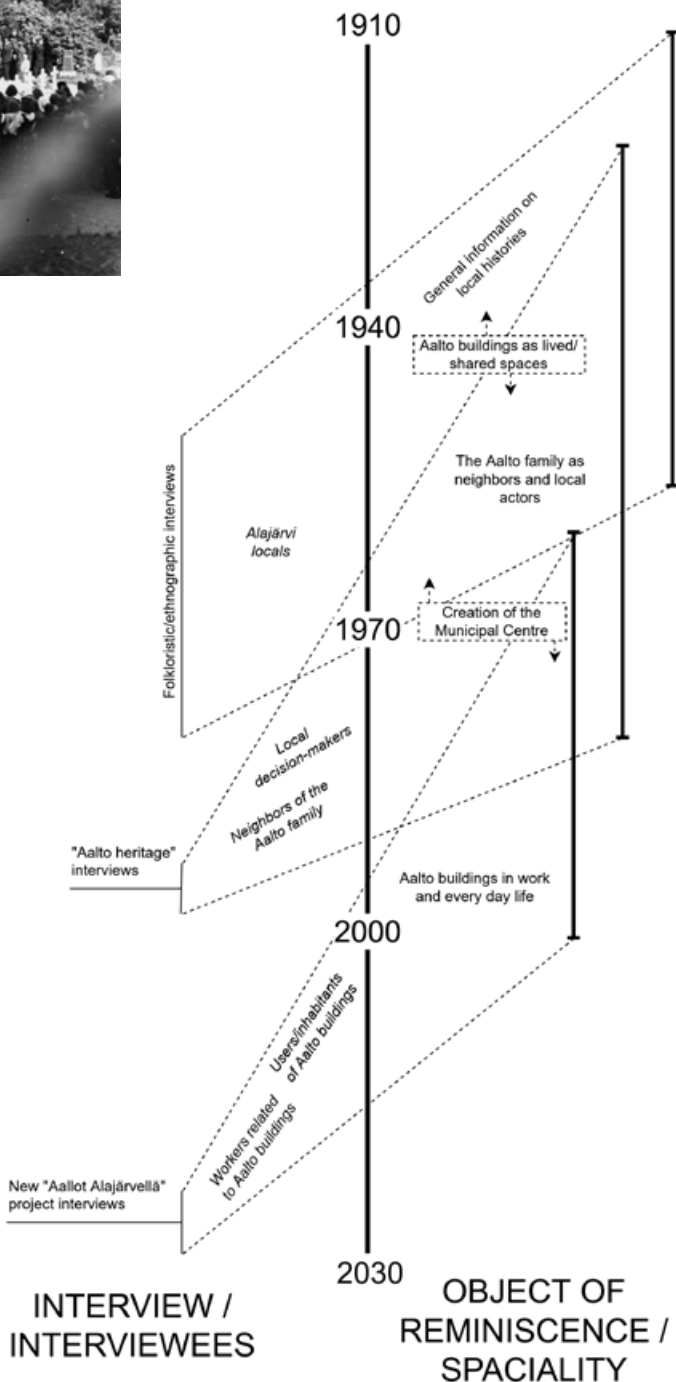


4. Funeral of a soldier in the 1940s at the 1918 memorial designed by Aalto.
Photo: Photographer unknown © Archive of the City of Alajärvi.



5. Hospital cook Anneli Sissala (middle) taking a coffee break in the kitchen of the Alajärvi hospital in the 1960s.
Photo: Photographer unknown © Anneli Sissala private collection

2. Aerial photo of the town of Alajärvi in 1935. Villa Väinölä is the grey building slightly to the right of the center of the image "looking" directly at the church. Just out of view on the right side of the photo is the Youth Association building.
Photo: Karhumäen veljekset © The Finnish Heritage Agency, CC BY 4.0
3. Alajärvi municipal centre in the 1970s. The Health Centre building on left, Municipal Hall on the middle, the towers of the old Church of Gabriel designed by C.L. Engel in the background.
Photo: Eva ja Pertti Ingervo, 1969.
© Alvar Aalto-foundation



p e o p l e



Jonas Malmberg

Jonas Malmberg, M.Sc. (arch.), M.A. (art history) was employed at the Alvar Aalto Foundation 2012-2025, supervising restorations of Aalto sites, and since 2025 has worked at Finnish Heritage Agency as a senior architect. He was the main author of the *Paimio Sanatorium Conservation Management Plan* (Aalto Foundation, 2015). Malmberg was a member in the working group preparing the UNESCO World Heritage nomination dossier *Aalto Works* (Finnish Heritage Agency, 2025). He has widely lectured on Finnish modernism. He is currently chairman of the board of DOCOMOMO Suomi-Finland and a voting member in the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on 20th Century Heritage. He is preparing his PhD on Säynätsalo Town hall at Aalto University, Helsinki.

SÄYNÄTSALO TOWN HALL – A CONTRADICTION BEGINNING

Jonas Malmberg

Säynätsalo Town Hall (1952) has become one of the most celebrated works by Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), and a key project in his career and personal history with Elsa Mäkinen, later Elissa Aalto (1922-1994). The project emerged from a wartime project, when Hilmer Brommels (1896-1984), factory manager of the wood-processing company Enso-Gutzeit, invited Aalto to participate in the planning of the community.

Possibly only Brommels and Aalto's office wanted anything else than an ordinary town hall, even though the competition brief expected a somewhat monumental building.¹ The jury had unanimously chosen Aalto's entry as the winner (Mattila 1994, 289). Yet the postwar material shortages were a daily issue to the layman representatives of the community who obviously saw their role as guardians of the municipality's interests, ensuring cost-effectiveness, durability and, above all, a certain modesty. This tension and the unusual appearance of the building resulted in a certain growing suspicion among the residents. Later, the building became an important symbol to the community, but during the construction period and after its completion that was not obvious. There was a clear resistance toward the building, especially among the local communists, while the Social Democrats and the very few Conservatives appreciated it.²

According to the chairman of the municipal council, Uuno Jokinen (1915-2008), the stricter communists, represented, for instance, by Harry Arikka (1908-1953), after the separation of local socialists in the council, strongly criticized the town hall after its completion, calling it a milling plant. Later, an architect group from the Soviet Union visited the building, and Jokinen asked the sympathetic 80-year-old leader of the group, the designer of Moscow University, for his opinion of the building.³ The answer was overly complimentary. Jokinen was even more delighted as the controversial neon lights of the local bank⁴ were considered fully unsuitable by the leader.⁵

Harry Arikka, the voice of criticism

The available documents do not reveal any major disagreements between the community and the building's designers during the construction. There were a few dissenting voices on the building committee, but it appears to have acted as a unanimous group and defended the decisions made, for example, at the municipal

council meeting in July 1951.⁶ Aalto had a mutual understanding and one-to-one relationship with the key stakeholders, Uuno Jokinen and municipal secretary Reino Malinen (1910-1976). However, Jokinen also told of how Harry Arikka, the chairman of the municipal board, was a key figure in gradually arousing criticism. Arikka participated as a communal representative both in the competition jury and later in the building committee. He expressed his dissatisfaction even directly to Aalto on various occasions. During one site visit Aalto even suddenly left the meeting after a verbal attack by Arikka.⁷

Arikka was locally active and politically committed to socialism. Something of his temper may be revealed in his personal history, as the factory had earlier dismissed him for political reasons. On the other hand, he has been referred to as being a calm person and important in creating local self-esteem.⁸ However, Arikka's political convictions didn't hinder the business he started after his factory career ended; his cinema became a popular venue for residents regardless of their political opinions.⁹ His role as a kind of counterweight to the project is interesting on a personal level, but it is difficult to prove his influence in detail during the course of the project even though he had been involved in numerous building activities in the region.¹⁰ During his lifetime he had as many as 39 communal representative positions.¹¹

On the other hand, Arikka probably played a part in Aalto's later frustration with the municipality.¹² According to Jussi Niinistö, Arikka's strong influence was evident in the fact that there remained a strained relationship between local communists and Aalto.¹³ Later, Aalto used the famous painting by Fernand Léger as an instrument to express his frustration towards the community. He also travelled on the lake on his self-designed boat "Nemo propheta in patria".¹⁴

Postponed inauguration

When the town hall was completed, a vivid discussion on the ceremony took place at the municipal council at the final meeting on August 18, 1951. Jokinen had proposed a ceremony in which there would be an opportunity for the councilors and media representatives to visit the building, and they would be served coffee. On the following day, there would be the main celebration with dinner for the invited guests. The discussion was flavoured by political ideology. According to the minutes:

"Councillor B. [Bertta] Jansson opposed the proposed festive gathering, the entire inauguration ceremony and especially the dinner for the invited gentlemen and suggested that the celebration would be held by open invitation only, so that everyone would have the opportunity to participate in the inauguration of the building."¹⁵

The first council meeting at the new town hall was held on December 20, 1951, without major ceremonies besides a few speeches.¹⁶ The inauguration itself took place not earlier than August 24, 1952, and it was a combination of the ideas presented a year earlier.¹⁷ With an open invitation, everyone could participate in the first part and be served with coffee. From the later afternoon the event with a dinner was reserved for the invited guests, including Alvar Aalto, Hilmer Brommels, Wäinö Aaltonen, Wivi Lönn and William Lehtinen.¹⁸

Increasing value

Since its completion, the value of the town hall has become widely understood, and the difficulties in the beginning have sunk into oblivion. Gradually, appreciation for the building has increased. Both domestically and internationally it was widely published in the architectural press and naturally mentioned in all the Aalto monographs. In addition to that, the photo of the council chamber was featured on the cover of the comprehensive history of Finnish architecture *Suomen rakennustaidetta* by Nils Erik Wickberg (1959), and the façade of the building featured during the following decade on the cover of *Uutta Suomalaista arkkitehtuuria* by Pekka Suhonen (1967), published in several languages. The building was also featured relatively early in the Japanese GA series by Akira Muto (1973), who had been working in Studio Aalto.

As the building became increasingly more appreciated it received protection as a national monument in 1995 (Ministry of Environment 8.6.1995 decision N:o 10/561/94). During this millennium it has been included several times in various populist collections of the most important pieces of architecture. In 2007 it was included among the 1001 buildings one should see before you die.¹⁹

In 2015 the town hall was included in two books: the first, *100 buildings, 1900-2000* by Thom Mayne and Eui-Sung Yi, encompassed the 20th century, while the second *A History of Architecture in 100 Buildings* by Dan Cruickshank, encompassed the whole of the history of architecture. In 2021, the town hall was included in the *New York Times* list of the 25 most important buildings of post-WW-II architecture worldwide.

What is next? At least the town hall is currently on the tentative list for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, among 12 other Aalto sites.²⁰ That may be something that none of the original stakeholders could have imagined.²¹ Thanks to Arikka and the other members of both the competition jury and the construction board, Aalto's entry was broad-mindedly chosen as the winner and would eventually be completed on the relatively remote island in Central Finland.

Endnotes

- 1 Säynätsalo Town Hall competition brief. 1. Jyväskylä City Archives.
- 2 Satu Mattila, "Alvar Aallon kunnantalo", in *Päivät seutuvilla Päijänteiden*, ed. Matti Rautjoki (Jyväskylä: Säynätsalon kunta, 1994), 308; Juhani Niinistö, "Arvomme kirkonmäellä", *Jyväskylän Deep South*, 1.11.2025: <https://saynatsalo.net/2025/11/01/arvomme-kirkonmaella> (accessed 23.12.2025).
- 3 Jokinen couldn't remember his name, but he may have been Lev Vladimirovich Rudnev (1885-1956).
- 4 See Jonas Malmberg. "Interactions of Art and Architecture: The Case of Alvar Aalto's Town Hall in Säynätsalo", *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 1/2023, 67.
- 5 Matti Rautjoki (ed.), *Saarelaiset muistelevat. Säynätsalolaisuutta etsimässä* (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 1991), 214–215.
- 6 Minutes of Council Meeting, 10.7.1951. Jyväskylä City Archives.
- 7 Rautjoki (ed.), *Saarelaiset muistelevat*, 214.
- 8 Tarja Liimatainen, "Pellonpään vaiheita 1946 jälkeen", in *Yritystä aidan molemminpuolin. Säynätsaloseuran julkaisuja* 4 (2011), 14.
- 9 Juhani Niinistö, "Hokkasen veljesten yrittäjätarina", *Jyväskylän Deep South*, 20.2.2022: <https://saynatsalo.net/2022/02/20/hokkasen-veljesten-yrittajatarina/> (accessed 18.11.2025).
- 10 Epe Arikka, son of Harry Arikka, phone conversation with the author, 7.11.2025.
- 11 Liimatainen, "Pellonpään vaiheita 1946 jälkeen", 14–15.
- 12 Malmberg, "Interactions of Art and Architecture", 68-69.
- 13 Niinistö, "Arvomme kirkonmäellä".
- 14 Malmberg "Interactions of Art and Architecture", 62-68.
- 15 Minutes of Council Meeting, 18.9.1951. Jyväskylä City Archives.
- 16 Minutes of Council Meeting, 20.12.1951. Jyväskylä City Archives.
- 17 Minutes of Council Meeting, 14.7.1952. Jyväskylä City Archives.
- 18 Minutes of Council Meeting, 28.7.1952. Jyväskylä City Archives; Mattila, "Alvar Aallon kunnantalo", 244-245.
- 19 Mark Irving (ed.), *1001 buildings you must see before you die: The World's Architectural Masterpieces* (Miami: Gasell Illustrated, 2007), 489.
- 20 See Finnish Heritage Agency, "Aalto Works: Nomination for Inscription on to the World Heritage List 2024": <https://museovirasto.kuvat.fi/kuvat/Teemakokonaisuuksia/Julkaisuja/Aalto-Works.pdf> (accessed 18.11.2025).
- 21 The World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972 – but here I refer to the global and outstanding universal value.

Figures



1. Säynätsalo Town Hall soon after its completion in 1952.

Photo: Eino Mäkinen, around 1952. © Alvar Aalto Foundation



2. The town Hall under construction.

Photo: Eduard or Claudia Neuenschwander, 1951. © Alvar Aalto Foundation

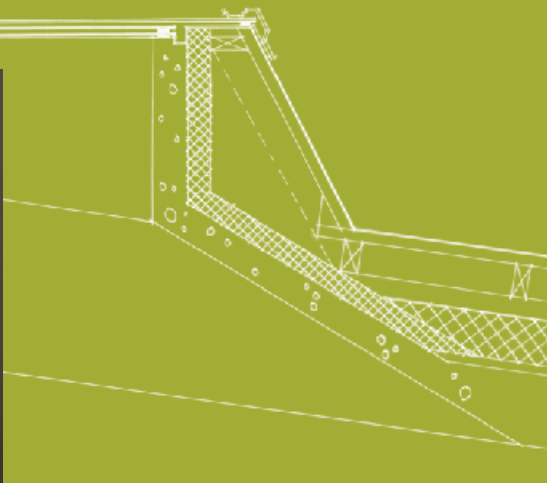


3. Active citizens of Säynätsalo (Väinö Salminen, Harry Arikka and Paavo Merikoski) at a local sports club meeting. *Sata vuotta lasten ja nuorten liikuntaa Säynätsalossa vuosina 1922–2022*, 242



4. The iconic grass steps before finalizing works.
Photo: Eino Mäkinen, 1952. © Alvar Aalto Foundation

p e o p l e



Andrea Nalesso

Andrea Nalesso is a qualified architect with a PhD in the History of Arts. His work bridges professional practice and academic research, combining design expertise with critical inquiry. Founder of Step Architects, he leads projects defined by functional minimalism and a deep exploration of spatial quality, with particular attention to the concept of atmosphere in architecture. His approach is strongly influenced by architectural photography, the central focus of his doctoral research. He graduated from Università Iuav di Venezia and earned his PhD at Ca' Foscari University of Venice with the thesis *Exhibitions as Spatial Visual Stories. The Art of Narrating in G. E. Kidder Smith's Architectural Photography*, analysing how visual strategies shape spatial narratives. His research further investigates the relationship between architecture, visual culture, and exhibition practices, exploring how space is constructed, perceived, and narrated through images. This background enables him to approach each project through a narrative lens, acting as a visual strategist who defines how space and light communicate identity. He has developed international experience in interior and exhibition design, collaborating with museums and institutions, and serves as a Teaching Assistant at Università Iuav di Venezia in History of Architecture and Architectural Photography.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION ON DISPLAY: G.E. KIDDER SMITH AND THE ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY OF ALVAR AALTO

Andrea Nalesso

Introduction

On June 13, 1963, George Everard Kidder Smith (1913–1997) received a commission from the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service (SITES), to curate the traveling exhibition *The Work of Alvar Aalto*, which featured photographs he personally took, developed, and printed.¹ The first attempt of SITES to organize an exhibition on Alvar Aalto's work go back to 1952, though this did not take place, however, until 1963, with the contribution of Kidder Smith.² The American exhibition falls within a period of great prominence for the Aalto studio, characterized by a series of monographic exhibitions held in Finland (1962) and several European capitals during the 1960s.³ By the 1960s, Kidder Smith was an authoritative expert on Aalto's oeuvre, whose studies began in the mid-30s.⁴ 1963 also represented a period of professional recognition in the United States for both of them. Aalto received the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal, while Kidder Smith was honored with the AIA Medal for Architectural Photography.⁵ This moment capped a relationship that began in 1939, when Kidder Smith met Aalto for the first time in Finland.⁶ Their professional bond gradually evolved into a relationship characterized by a deep personal friendship.⁷ As early as the 1940s, the American photographer began promoting Aalto's work in the United States.⁸ Kidder Smith's promotion of Aalto was rooted in his admiration for Aalto's 'humanistic' design philosophy, which prioritized the human experience and environmental context over mere aesthetic form, transforming a documentary effort into a lifelong cultural mission.

The exhibition *Work of Alvar Aalto* opened in December 1963 and it was eagerly anticipated. Beyond the remarkable acclaim it has received, the exhibition stands as the longest-running traveling exhibition in which Kidder Smith was involved as both curator and photographer.⁹ Kidder Smith's notable works included books and travelling exhibitions, with wide-ranging surveys of the architectural and landscape heritage of various nations, such as Sweden, Brazil, Switzerland, Italy, Europe and the United States.¹⁰ The singular exception from this broad, national-survey approach was his enduring focus on Alvar Aalto, the only architect to whom Kidder Smith dedicated systematic, monographic research.¹¹

Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service

The Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service (SITES) was established in 1951¹² by the Smithsonian Institution with the aim of producing thematic exhibitions to be loaned to public institutions and non-profit organizations for educational purposes. A defining characteristic of these exhibitions was their exceptional flexibility in terms of transportation and assembly. Images were mounted on a predetermined number of standardized panels that could be installed without specialized labor. At the conclusion of each exhibition, the panels were packed into two or three crates and shipped to the next venue, where they were unpacked and reassembled following basic instructions for assembly and maintenance. This setup was in contrast to traditional exhibitions that relied on architectural models, large format drawings and photographic prints. The high degree of flexibility of the SITES exhibitions enabled their nationwide distribution while significantly reducing management and logistical costs.

The work of Alvar Aalto (1963-1981): Kidder Smith's spatial and visual narratives

The Work of Alvar Aalto was more than an exhibition; it was a transatlantic dialogue. The show opened on December 10, 1963, at the Octagon House in Washington,¹³ (Fig. 1) and reveals the full expression of Kidder Smith's multifaceted skills. As an American photographer, critic, and "builder" of books and exhibitions, he seamlessly integrated visual documentation with narrative strategies that captured both spatial atmosphere and lived experience. *The Work of Alvar Aalto* likewise followed this pattern.

The exhibition was a narrative project (Figs. 2, 3), composed of 39 white masonite panels with walnut frames (measuring 104x104 cm / 41x41 inch), on which Kidder Smith arranged photographs he had personally developed and printed. His selection included only Aalto's works in his native European context.¹⁴ The panels were numbered on the back from 1 to 39, and the assembly instructions called for a sequential order. In some cases, multiple panels formed a group of the same building. The panels were roughly organized as follows: Panels 1–2: Credits and Kidder Smith's introduction to Aalto; Panels 3–37: A panorama of the major works, including the Paimio Sanatorium (1933), Viipuri Library (1935), Sunila Cellulose Factory (1938, 1947, 1954), Villa Mairea (1939), Säynätsalo Town Hall (1952), Church of the Three Crosses, Imla (1958), Maison Louis Carré (1959), Neue Vahr highrise residential building (1962), and others; Panels 38–39: Furniture and lamps and Aalto's urban planning for Imla.¹⁵

The composition of these panels was deliberately immersive (Figs. 4a, 4b). Although the traveling nature of the exhibition limited the possibilities for managing the physical exhibition space, Kidder Smith's creativity was unrestrained. Where necessary, not only photographs but also captions and drawings were used. The images were arranged on panels, leaving ample vertical or horizontal white space for the caption. Occasionally, multiple panels were arranged as a single group focused on one building, combining various details in a dynamic way similar to Kidder Smith's published books.¹⁶ As noted by critic Wolf Von Eckardt in *The Washington Post*, through these images, "we can experience Aalto's architecture to the extent that the two-dimensional art of the photographer can ever transmit the three-dimensional art of the architect".¹⁷

The traveling exhibition achieved great success, reaching a considerable number of institutions throughout the United States (Fig. 5). One of its stages is even available online, explained in detail by a reporter.¹⁸ It was distributed by SITES for 18 years (1963–1981). Over the time, panels' collection underwent revisions, and from 1973 onwards the number of frames was reduced from 39 to 28. With Aalto's death in 1976, bookings surged. In 1982, the exhibition was terminated. Journalist Marikki Penttilä visited the exhibition in its early stage and he wrote an article for the *Helsingin Sanomat* confirming the quality of Kidder Smith's work and the deep knowledge of Aalto's work.¹⁹ On that same occasion Kidder Smith gave him an interview, stating that his favourite buildings by Aalto were the Paimio Sanatorium (1933) and the Sunila cellulose factory (1938).²⁰ These were precisely the first works he had photographed on his first trip to Finland in 1939.

Conclusion

Kidder Smith is undoubtedly one of the authors who contributed most significantly to the promotion of Alvar Aalto in the United States. For him, Aalto would always be associated with terms such as "humanism, regard for nature, concern for use, insistence on firmness, lucidity of organization, imagination in details, and poetic joy delight."²¹ However, among all these, the characteristic of Aalto that touched him most deeply was his being 'human'. Without distinction, Aalto placed people at the center of the project, whether it was a building, a city, a piece of furniture, or an industrial product, always with the ultimate aspiration of improving the human condition because "behind every architectural effort, worthy of being its symbol, there is the will to demonstrate the desire to build a paradise on earth for man."²² Perhaps it is precisely this ideal that guided Kidder Smith in his repeated journey to discover Alvar Aalto and his path. To know architecture is to understand the effect it produces on

the human being. Knowing the past to learn and not forget, knowing the present to be aware, and, with these tools, being able to build a better future.

Endnotes

- 1 Penelope Billings letter to G.E. Kidder Smith, 3.6.1963. Smithsonian Institution Archive.
- 2 Andrea Nalesso, "Exhibitions as Visual Spatial Stories. The Art of Narrating in G.E. Kidder Smith's Architectural Photography" (PhD thesis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2024), 155.
- 3 Ibid, 316
- 4 Angelo Maggi, *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds: The Travel of Architectural Photography* (Novato: Oro Editions, 2022), 217
- 5 In May 1963, Aalto and Kidder Smith met in Miami during the awards.
- 6 Nalesso, "Exhibitions as Visual Spatial Stories", 128-142.
- 7 Archivio Progetti, 198-203
- 8 George Everard Kidder Smith, "Some Houses for Employees in Finland," *The American Scandinavian Review* (1940, Spring), 36-38; George Everard Kidder Smith, "Alvar Aalto," *The American Scandinavian Review* (1940, Winter), 313-320.
- 9 Nalesso, "Exhibitions as Visual Spatial Stories", 128-142.
- 10 Maggi, *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds*.
- 11 Nalesso, "Exhibitions as Visual Spatial Stories", 128-142
- 12 Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, "Twenty-five year at SITES" in *Update* (1977, Spring), viii.
- 13 *The Work of Alvar Aalto* (first exhibition venue), The Octagon House, Washington, December, 11-29, 1963.
- 14 Wolf Von Eckardt, "The Finnish Lines. Alvar Aalto's Exhibit Makes a Comeback", *The Washington Post*, (1980, July 19), B1, B8.
- 15 For the detailed list of panels see: Nalesso, "Exhibitions as Visual Spatial Stories", 314-315
- 16 Maggi, *G.E. Kidder Smith Builds*, 216.
- 17 Wolf Von Eckardt, "Octagon Introduces Finnish Architect," *The Washington Post* (December 15, 1963), G8.
- 18 *The Work of Alvar Aalto*, Department of Architecture, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, March 29-20 April, 1969: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3az0dV0Lkg/> (accessed 31.1.2026). On the internet the exhibition refers to 1968, while from the documents kept at the Smithsonian the exhibition appears to have been held in 1969.
- 19 Marikki Penttilä, "Alvar Aalto in the United States 1963-66", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 335 (1963), 19.
- 20 Penttilä, "Alvar Aalto in the United States 1963-66", 19.
- 21 Kidder Smith's final words in the exhibition's introductory panel. Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio.
- 22 Alvar Aalto, *Il paradiso dell'architetto*, in *Idee di architettura. Scritti scelti 1921-1968* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1987), 135. Cited in Juhani Pallasmaa, *Lampi di pensiero. Fenomenologia della percezione in architettura*, ed. Mauro Fratta and Matteo Zambelli (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 2011), 25.

Figures



1. *The Work of Alvar Aalto*, The Octagon House, Washington, December 11–29, 1963.
Photo: City New Bureau, Washington, D.C. © Smithsonian Institution Archives: Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Archives



2, 3. *The Work of Alvar Aalto, The Octagon House, Washington, December 11–29, 1963.*

Photo: SITES © Smithsonian Institution Archives: Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Archives



4a, 4b. *The Work of Alvar Aalto*, Panel 12, Säynätsalo Town hall (left), Panel 37, Neue Vahr high-rise residential building, Bremen, Germany (right).

Photo: SITES © Smithsonian Institution Archives: Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Archives



5. *The Work of Alvar Aalto*, Pence Hall Gallery, School of Architecture, University of Kentucky, Lexington, April 2–24, 1966.

Photo: Sam Abell © The Kentucky Kernel: from *The Kentucky Kernel* (April 21, 1966), 3.

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ALVAR AALTO



ALVAR AALTO

The present publication presents contemporary reinterpretations of the architectural and cultural legacy of Alvar, Aino, and Elissa Aalto through a rich selection of articles first shared at the **6th Alvar Aalto Researchers' Network Seminar** held in Jyväskylä. The contributions explore evolving conceptual frameworks, renewed readings of key buildings, and fresh biographical perspectives that broaden familiar narratives. From theoretical reflections on humane modernism to analyses of lived experience, care, materiality, and changing societal conditions, the texts reveal how Aalto-related ideas and environments continue to inspire, challenge, and transform architectural thinking today.

Richly illustrated and international in scope, the publication offers fresh insights for architects, researchers, students, and anyone seeking to understand the enduring relevance of Aalto's human centred modernism.

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